

**In dialogue with feminisms:
Four novels of Assia Djebar**

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, submitted at the University of Edinburgh, has been composed by Priscilla Marie Ringrose and that the work is the candidate's own and that

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Abstract

In dialogue with feminisms: Four novels of Assia Djebar

The work of Assia Djebar, the most celebrated contemporary female novelist to emerge from North Africa, has been labelled “feminist” since the publication of her watershed collection of short stories, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (1980), which marked her entry onto the international stage. Since then, whether rewriting the bloody history of colonialism, revisiting the thorny history of early Islam, or opening up the cloistered world of Algerian society, Djebar has placed woman at the centre of her enterprise. But what type of feminism does Djebar espouse? This thesis examines four works of Assia Djebar in relation to selected French and Arab feminist theorists, with the intention of analysing what Djebar refers to as her “own kind of feminism”. It argues that Djebar’s own feminism is in dialogue with a variety of feminisms, from the philosophical constructs of the French feminists, and the newly chartered area of Arab feminist historical scholarship, to the perspectives of mainstream feminist historical scholarship and the controversial works of Christian feminists. This dialogue provides a basis for confronting some of the wide-ranging questions raised by her work. How do French feminists’ concerns with woman’s relation to language, writing, and sexuality express themselves within Djebar’s novels? How can the maternal world be affirmed in the context of a repressive Islamic patriarchal society? Can Djebar reclaim a patriarchal religion such as Islam for women? And can Algerian history be reappropriated by and for women? The feminist readings of the four novels examined, which pay particular attention to the approaches of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Leila Ahmed, expose the type of linguistic and political strategies which Djebar employs in her affirmation of women’s autonomy and in her challenge to patriarchal norms, as she rejects the preordained positions which history, society and religion have allotted to Algerian womanhood.

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	3
"Hey, you there!"	3
Djebar	6
My choice of Djebar's books and of theorists	8
Introducing the works studied in this thesis	11
Three French Feminists and One Arab scholar	15
Literature Review	22
 <i>In dialogue with Kristeva: L'Amour, la fantasia</i>	 31
Introduction	31
Kristeva and Identity	32
Kristeva and language.	35
A Kristevan model	37
The plural subject	38
The symbolic mode - historical sections - Parts 1 and 2	40
The symbolic mode - autobiographical sections - Parts 1 and 2	51
The Semiotic mode - Parts 1 and 2	62
A permanent alternation?- Part 3	70
Conclusion	85
 <i>In dialogue with Cixous: Vaste est la prison</i>	 89
Introduction	89
Cixous and the patriarchal value system	89
Vaste est la prison - "A subject is at least a thousand people"	93
The Preface	95
Part 1 - The love story	101
Part 2 - Ecriture des femmes/Ecriture féminine	122
Part 3 - The family history	143
Part 4- Le sang de l'écriture	150
Conclusion	151

<i>In dialogue with Irigaray: Ombre sultane.....</i>	<i>153</i>
Introduction	153
Irigaray	154
Plato on the couch: Material girl”	161
A double-take on the novel	166
Part 1 - Moving away from a masculine economy of relations	168
Part 2 - Towards a feminine economy of relations	185
Part 3 - Maternal restoration or paternal revenge?	199
Conclusion	210
 <i>In dialogue with Feminisms: Loin de Médine</i>	 <i>213</i>
Introduction	213
The Blank Page	213
The Form of the novel	216
The Subject of the novel	222
The Prophet - the real subject or the other subject ?	232
Femmes-mères, femmes-épouses, filles-héritières	237
Ideological collision?	239
Historical methodology	244
 <i>Conclusion.....</i>	 <i>249</i>
 <i>Bibliography</i>	 <i>253</i>
Primary Sources	253
Secondary Sources	253
 <i>Appendix A: Published Papers</i>	 <i>257</i>
Letters with Publishers’ Permissions	257
Copies of published papers	257

Introduction

"Hey, you there!"

Ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals ... by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police[man] (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'¹

The image of Althusser's individual walking along the street only to be startled by this unexpected call conjures up the compelling and compulsive effect of certain ideologies on the individual. Taking his analogy further, Althusser claims that when the call rings out "one individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/knowing that it is for him", recognising that "it is really 'he' who is meant by the hailing"². By this "mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion", he becomes a *subject*.³ The rare exceptions to the rule are the few who do not recognise the verbal call, wolf-whistle or tap on the shoulder and do not turn back.⁴ Those who are not recruited by (the) ideology as "good subjects" are simply relegated by Althusser to the status of "bad subjects".

The first impetus for this thesis came when I visualised Assia Djébar walking along a street, and in the distance three French feminists trying to attract her attention. Each one in turn calls out. Does she turn around? Is it merely a question of turning around, or walking on unperturbed, or can I fudge Althusser's imagery by imagining her stopping for a moment to talk to her interpellators?

My original intention was to assess how far Djébar had been interpellated by feminist thinking, in order to categorise her, in Althusser's terminology, as a "good" or "bad" subject, a "good" or "bad" feminist. However the analogy of the "ideological" policeman, a figure of authority and power, "arresting" his subject would imply a

¹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1969). In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971), p. 55.

² Ibid. , p. 56.

³ Ibid. , p. 55.

⁴ Ibid. , p. 55.

hierarchical relationship between writer and theorist. The second image, *of two subjects talking together* on Althusser's street, suggests a more egalitarian relationship:

... je dis que l'essentiel, *c'est qu'il y ait deux femmes, que chacune parle, et que l'une raconte ce qu'elle voit à l'autre.* La solution se cherche dans des rapports de femmes. J'annonce cela dans mes textes, j'essaie de le concrétiser dans leurs constructions, avec leurs miroirs multiples.⁵

Djebar's comment above, proffered in the wildly different context of the problem of Algerian women (the quote is preceded by "Quand je me pose des questions sur les solutions à trouver pour les femmes dans des pays comme le mien...") inadvertently points to another solution, the solution I have come up with in this thesis – namely to put two women in relation with each other. Echoing Djebar's words, in each of my chapters there are two women (Djebar and a succession of feminist theorists), each of whom speaks, and each of whom tells the other what she sees.

I bring Djebar together with women with whom I think she will have a lot in common. If it is not too incongruous at this stage to recall the first meeting between the woman that Flaubert disparagingly called "La Bovary" and her future lover Léon, I expect to be party to "une de ces vagues [hopefully not too vague] conversations où le hasard des phrases vous ramène toujours au centre fixe d'une sympathie commune"⁶, although in some cases I am surprised to discover that Djebar has less in common with the theorists than I had presumed. Secondly, I expect the meeting between them to be productive, creating a new space in which their ideas can metaphorically "bounce off each other". And finally I expect the result to be mutually illuminating, and in particular to promote a better understanding of Djebar's work.

Mackward provides what could perhaps be construed as "etiquette" for the way feminist critics should ideally approach *textes féminins*⁷. For her, this approach

⁵ Mildred Mortimer "Entretien avec Assia Djebar, écrivain algérien.", *Research in African Literatures*, 19:2 (1988), pp. 197-205, p. 205. My emphasis.

⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Garnier, 1971), p. 87. First published 1857.

⁷ Christine Mackward, "Nouveau regard sur la critique féministe en France", *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 50:1, pp. 47-54, p. 49. Quoted in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "Feminist Scholarship

coincides with feminist attentiveness to its object as described by Cixous in *La Venue à L'écriture*: "Celle qui regarde avec le regard qui reconnaît, qui étudie, respecte, ne prend pas, ne griffe pas, mais attentivement, avec un doux acharnement, contemple et lit, caresse, baigne, fait rayonner l'autre".⁸ This "soft" approach militates against the temptation to "stuff" such texts down the theoretical machinery, a pitfall I hope to side-step by means of a dialogical approach.

Judging a writer on the basis of her service to feminism is as bad as judging her "according to her looks".⁹

Jong's wry comment points to the dangers of reducing literature to ideology or in my case of reducing literature to literary theories. Rather than judging Djébar "according to her looks", I hope to follow Mackward's advice and to observe her (in dialogue with others) with a gaze that "recognises, studies and respects", although I cannot promise to go as far as "to caress, bathe and make her radiant". And, sorry to say, on one occasion I am even compelled to "seize the text" and "make [my] mark".¹⁰

I would say in conclusion that the aim of this thesis is to stage meetings between the texts of Djébar and those of various feminist theorists, and to listen in on the ensuing dialogues, in order to evaluate how much Djébar's work has in common with these different feminisms. The aim is not to try to prove whether or not Djébar has been *influenced* by specific theorists (in any case, as far as French feminism is concerned, Djébar has not read Kristeva, whereas we know that she is familiar with Cixous¹¹), but rather to show at what point what Djébar describes as "my own kind of

and the social construction of woman", in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (eds), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 94.

⁸ Hélène Cixous (en collaboration avec Annie Leclerc and Madeleine Gignon), *La Venue à l'écriture* (Paris:UGE, 10/18, 1977), p. 56.

⁹ Joanna Griffiths referring to Erica Jong's new book *What do women want?* (Bloomsbury, 1999) in *Guardian Weekly* Feb 21, 1999.

¹⁰ I refer here to the chapter on *Loin de Médine* where I contest Djébar's interpretation of Islamic history.

¹¹ The first fact I established in a brief conversation I held with Djébar at the ASCALF conference in 1997, the second is evident by Djébar's use of an epigraph from *La Jeune Née*.

feminism”¹² runs in parallel with these other feminisms, as well as demonstrating at what points they move apart - a project which I hope would be in line with Djébar’s own deep conviction that “Western feminists have had as much to learn from their ‘other worlds’ sisters as the reverse.”¹³

Djébar

Born in the coastal city of Cherchell in 1936, Assia Djébar (*née* Fatima-Zohra Imalhayène) is Algeria’s most renowned and prolific woman novelist and filmmaker. I will let Clarisse Zimra take up her story:

In 1957 a young unknown burst on the French literary scene with an insolently sensual story written on a dare. *La Soif* had everything: beautiful females, well-off males, fast cars, lazy days at the beach, and, to top it off, a botched abortion resulting in death. Its author, the proper daughter of a Moslem civil servant, was not quite twenty years old. To the Parisian pundits, the resemblance to young Françoise Sagan’s 1954 scandalous *Bonjour tristesse* published by the same press (Julliard) was unmistakable.¹⁴

Assia Djébar’s “self-indulgent bourgeois stories” (*La Soif* was soon followed by *Les Impatients*, 1958) attracted nothing but praise from the French press, eager to jump on an example of the successful implementation of “leur mission civilisatrice”, and equal contempt from Algerian revolutionaries for whom these stories “did nothing to advance the cause of national liberation”¹⁵. Djébar would nevertheless prove her political commitment during the War of Independence, a time which for her brought exile, first to Tunisia where she took a degree in history, then to Morocco. This period also signaled her entry into a more politicised literary output, producing two novels, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) and *Les Alouettes naïves* (1967) “works that even the most intransigent revolutionaries would consider ‘ideologically

¹² Clarisse Zimra, “Woman’s Memory Spans Centuries: An interview with Assia Djébar”, Afterword to Assia Djébar, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, trans. Marjolijn. de Jagger, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), p. 175.

¹³ Clarisse Zimra, “Disorienting the Subject in Djébar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia*”, *Yale French Studies*, 87 (1995), pp. 149-70, p. 161. The quotation is referred to in a footnote which cites Djébar’s 1992 interview with Clarisse Zimra, “Woman’s Memory Spans Centuries”, no page number specified.

¹⁴ Clarisse Zimra, “Writing Woman: The Novels of Assia Djébar”, *Substance. A Review of Literary Criticism*, 21:3 (1992), pp. 68-84, p. 68.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

correct' ”.¹⁶ She did not return to Algeria until 1962, the year of independence, when she took up a post at the University of Algiers, and went on to publish a collection of verse, *Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse*, (and other works), under the aegis of the state publishing house (SNED) “both unmistakable signs of official favour”.¹⁷ In 1969 she stopped publishing and there followed a ten-year period of near silence.¹⁸

Djebar's return to public life came in 1979 with the production of her first film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, which received first prize at the Venice film festival. Her return to narrative “life”, and entry into the international stage came in 1980, with *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, a collection of short stories which “heralded a change in the thematic and stylistic nature of her writing”.¹⁹ Published by “des femmes”, it signaled a “new concern with women's words and women's voices: the aural manifestation of a female solidarity”.²⁰

Femmes d'Alger représenta le saut dans la modernité scriptive déclenché par le ferment philosophique et féministe des années de théâtre à Paris d'une part (début des années soixante-dix) et de l'autre (fin des années soixante-dix) par le retour au pays et l'expérience sur le tas de l'oralité...²¹

Since then Djebar has published three semi-autobiographical works, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), *Ombre sultane* (1987) and *Vaste est la prison* (1995), as part of an Algerian quartet, but interrupted this literary trajectory to produce *Loin de Médine* (1991), a novel about the origins of Islam, which she felt compelled to write in

¹⁶ Ibid. , p. 68.

¹⁷ Ibid. , p. 69.

¹⁸ Twenty-two years later she would admit to the *real* reason for this silence: “Je sais que j'ai souvent dit avant que mon silence avait à voir avec ma relation problématique au langage [to the French language]. C'est ce que j'ai prétendu principalement pour qu'on me laisse en paix. Mais vos questions me forcent à reconsidérer et je suis persuadée qu'il y avait quelque chose d'autre au fond de moi. Je sais, par exemple, que j'ai dû attendre jusqu'à *L'Amour, la fantasia* pour être à même de prendre en charge mon écriture, pour être capable d'inscrire mon moi profond dans mon oeuvre.” *Women of Algiers in their apartment*, trad. Marjolijn de Jagger, (Richmond: UP of Virginia, 1992), pp. 159-211. Quoted in Sonia Assa-Rosenblum, “M'introduire dans ton histoire: Entrée des narrateurs dans *L'Amour, la fantasia* d'Assia Djebar”, *Etudes Francophones* , 12:2 (1977), 67-80, p. 69.

¹⁹ Patricia Geesey, “Women's Worlds: Assia Djebar's *Loin de Médine*”, in Kenneth W. Harrow (ed.), *The Marabout and the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), pp. 40-50, p. 40.

²⁰ Ibid. , p. 40.

²¹ Clarisse Zimra, “Comment peut-on être musulmane?: Assia Djebar repense Médine”, *notre librairie*, 118, Nouvelles Écritures Feminines 2: Femmes d'ici et d'ailleurs (July- September 1994), pp. 57-63, p. 57.

response to rising fundamentalism in Algeria. *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (1996), the final volume of the Algerian quartet, is a direct and impassioned reaction to the current Algerian civil war, and a tribute to the works and deaths of well-known writers, intellectuals, and thinkers (including Franz Fanon, Albert Camus, Mouloud Mammeri, Kateb Yacine, Jean Amrouche and Abdelkader Alloula). This novel represents another violent interruption to her literary trajectory, written after she was shaken by the murder, in Oran, of Abdelkader Alloula, her brother-in-law, childhood friend and a respected theatre director and playwright.

Le Blanc de l'Algérie was closely followed by a collection of short stories, *Oran langue morte* (1997), a novel, *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* (1997), a love story set in France and *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, a collection of essays (1999).

After the publication of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, Djebbar was selected by an international jury of writers as laureate of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. She has also been awarded the following literary prizes: the Prix Maeterlinck, 1995 and Le prix libérateur for *Ombre sultane*, 1987.

All this is a long way from the most enduring and much-quoted autobiographical image in Djebbar's *oeuvre*, that of the little girl walking hand in hand with her schoolteacher father, who allowed her to sit in on a class full of boys, at a time when Algerian girls did not normally receive an education.²² It is not for nothing that years later, in an interview with Lise Gauvin, Djebbar declares that: "Donc le féminisme, chez nous, enfin l'émancipation des femmes, est passé par l'intercession des pères."²³ ***My choice of Djebbar's books and of theorists***

Although I initially described my methodology in terms of a dialogue between writer and theorist, this dialogue is mediated, in both cases, through selected texts. The thesis takes the form of four chapters, each dealing with one of Djebbar's novels, each of which is "matched" with texts from a selected theorist/scholar:

²² "Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l'école, un matin d'automne, main dans la main du père." Assia Djebbar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Casablanca: EDDIF, 1992), p. 15.

²³ Lise Gauvin, "Assia Djebbar, Territoires des langues: entretien", *Littérature - L'Ecrivain et ses langues*, 101 (February 1996), pp. 73-87, p. 81.

L'Amour, la fantasia – Julia Kristeva

Ombre sultane – Luce Irigaray

Vaste est la prison – Hélène Cixous

Loin de Médine – Leila Ahmed

In selecting a corpus from Djébar's *oeuvre* I decided to focus on the novelistic form. The corpus I have chosen comprises the four novels (above), written within the ten year period (1985-1995), which I characterise not so much as Djébar's feminist period, but rather as a period when her work has been in constant dialogue with feminism. These are the four novels which followed her watershed collection of short stories, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, the work which first marked her out not only as a writer of international stature, but also as a writer of "feminist" credentials. In the opening remarks of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Djébar states that of all her books, "this one [is the] most in dialogue with feminism"²⁴. I suggest that the dialogue with feminism begun in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* is sustained and elaborated in the succeeding four novels which I have selected.

Three of these novels are the semi-autobiographical works which I consider to be in "close conversation" with French feminism (*L'Amour, la fantasia*, *Ombre sultane* and *Vaste est la prison*, all part of the Algerian quartet). The fourth novel, *Loin de Médine*, as I mentioned earlier, represents an interruption in the autobiographical trajectory and an entry into "Arab-Islamic cultural-political spaces"²⁵. As Clerc (quoting Djébar) explains, the decision to write *Loin de Médine* was purely circumstantial:

Face à cette actualité menaçante [the Algerian riots of 1989], la romancière suspend l'écriture de *Vaste est la prison*: 'J'ai alors pris la décision d'écrire *Loin de Médine*. Avec *L'Amour, la fantasia* j'avais acquis un savoir-faire entre l'Histoire et le roman. Je me suis donc dit qu'il fallait que j'utilise cet acquis pour raconter les premiers temps de l'Islam du point de vue des

²⁴ In her article "Disorienting the Subject in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*", p. 151, Clarisse Zimra assumes that Djébar here is referring to French feminism.

²⁵ Winifred Woodhull, "Feminism and Islamic tradition", *Studies in 20th century literature*, 17:1 (1993), pp. 27-44, p.27.

femmes; j'ai senti que les intégristes allaient revenir en force et monopoliser la mémoire islamique.²⁶

Although this novel marks an interruption of the semi-autobiographical mode, and an entry into the Islamic arena, *Loin de Médine*, as Djébar's words above indicate, nevertheless continues the dialogue with feminism, and not only with French feminism, but also with other feminisms, such as Arab political feminism, Arab feminist historical scholarship, as well as with the general principles of feminist historical scholarship. As a result, I decided to widen my feminist enquiry, which was focused in the earlier chapters on the dialogue with French feminism, and to engage with the other feminisms with which *Loin de Médine* is also in dialogue.

Finally, the last novel in the Algerian quartet, *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, represents a further turning-point in her writing, signaling a departure from this dialogue with feminism towards a more pressing political agenda:

The White of Algeria marks a turning point in Djébar's career, because it is the first time she has come publicly, in voice as well as in print, to an openly political position regarding current events in her country. She indicts the official government policy ... but she also indicts a whole generation of writers and thinkers who have not spoken soon enough and loudly enough. Not any more.²⁷

The reference to the current political situation in Algeria brings me back to the current episode in Assia Djébar's own story. Living in exile like many of her compatriots, as of 1997, she has occupied the position of Distinguished Professor and Director of the Center for French and Francophone studies at Louisiana State University ... a long way from home.

²⁶ Interview with Sophie Bonnet in *Les Inrockuptibles*, October 1995, pp. 59-60. Quoted in Jeanne-Marie Clerc, *Assia Djébar: écrire, transgresser, résister* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), p. 116.

²⁷ Clarisse Zimra, "Introduction to Assia Djébar's *The White of Algeria*", *Yale French Studies*, 87 (1995), pp. 140-41. Quoted in Evelyne Accad, "Assia Djébar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision", *World Literature Today*, 70:4 (1996), pp. 801-12, p. 811.

Introducing the works studied in this thesis

The four novels I have selected are all introduced in full in each of the four related chapters. So at this stage it would be useful to give a general comparative overview of the four novels, starting with a quotation from the celebrated collection of short stories that immediately preceded them:

Je ne vois pour les femmes arabes qu'un seul moyen de tout débloquent: parler, parler sans cesse d'hier et aujourd'hui, parler entre nous, dans tous les gynécées, les traditionnels et ceux des H.L.M. Parler entre nous et regarder. Regarder dehors, regarder hors des murs et des prisons! ... La femme-regard et la femme-voix ... La voix qui cherche dans les tombeaux ouverts!¹

This passage sets the tone for the four novels which I examine, where "women speak out not only as individuals but also blend their voices to form polyphonic chorus that will resist the pressure to return [to] a state of silence" imposed on them for generations.² Here Djébar not only signals a move from the personal to the collective voice, but also a return to the gory past - "La voix qui cherche dans les tombeaux ouverts" could well be Djébar's own voice, which in the next novel, *L'Amour, la fantasia* will cry out the pain of "les aïeules mortes", in a tribute to the women sacrificed to the violent desires of the colonisers.

To the quest to reconstitute women's voices begun in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, *L'Amour la fantasia* adds two further ambitions, the re-examination of colonial history or restoration of a "more genuine" Algerian national identity (the book provides an Algerian perspective on both the French invasion of Algeria and the Algerian War of Independence) and the insertion of the autobiographical voice, an ambitious target even, it seems, for Djébar:

First, I had to figure a way to move back and forth between the past and the present. Second, I had to figure out a way to navigate between the world of men and the world of women. And then, as you know, I suddenly found my answer: I thought of the interwoven polyphony of all the women's voices in *Nouba* [*La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*]. They formed a chorus – a choir in which I wanted to plunge myself, but without completely dissolving,

¹ Assia Djébar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, p. 68.

² Patricia Geesey, "Women's Worlds: Assia Djébar's *Loin de Médine*", p. 41.

losing my own sense of self. I wanted to remain myself, yet become one of their voices. At that precise moment I discovered how to write my quartet: I had to reenter my own autobiography.³

And thus *Fantasia* was born, an autobiographical or rather semi-autobiographical novel in which Djébar starts off by juxtaposing autobiographical and historical chapters (dealing with the French invasion) in counterpoint, and ends by joining her own voice to a whole chorus of women's voices, whose aural testimonies recall the War of Independence. This solution on the level of form brought to light another familiar problem, that of writing resistance (it's a case of the Empire writing back) in the language of the coloniser, the language of the enemy, "the language of murder, blood and gore",⁴ a problem which Djébar attempts to address by "arabising" her French.

While the quest for national/historical identity is dropped in the succeeding novel, *Ombre sultane*, the principle of *female plurality* developed in *L'Amour, la fantasia* resurfaces here, as Djébar explores the *doubling of feminine identities* which is central to the novel's message of female sisterhood and solidarity. *Ombre sultane* tells the story of two women, the emancipated Isma and the traditional Hajila, who have both been married to the same man. Djébar recounts how Isma match-makes her ex-husband with the hapless, illiterate Hajila, and charts the trajectory of a relationship between the two women as a journey which begins in ambiguity and ends in solidarity.

Apart from feminine plurality, another aspect of *L'Amour, la fantasia* finds expression in *Ombre sultane*, albeit in a different form: war. In *Ombre sultane* war is re-enacted, this time in the relationship between the sexes: "In *A Sister* [*A Sister to Sheherazade*, English title of *Ombre sultane*] Djébar describes her [Isma's] relationship with her husband in terms of war (barricades, defiance, confrontation)

³ Clarisse Zimra, "When the past answers our present" – Assia Djébar talks about *Loin de Médine*", *Callaloo*, 16:1 (1993), pp. 116-31, p. 124-5.

⁴ Ibid., p.128.

... Likewise, Hajila, through Isma's narrative voice, describes her first sexual experience with the husband in terms of struggle, battle, and resistance."⁵

Although the story of Isma and Hajila appears to depart from the original autobiographical intent of the projected quartet, similarities can be discerned between the past experiences of Isma (as described in *Ombre sultane*), and those of the adolescent Djebbar (as described in *L'Amour, la fantasia*), giving autobiographical resonances to what at first reading appears to be a fictional story. Less predictably, a more sombre note of similarity is struck between the narrator of *Vaste est la prison* and the other protagonist in *Ombre sultane*, the timid, uneducated Hajila, as the terrifying experience Hajila suffers when her husband tries to blind her is repeated in the first Part of *Vaste est la prison*, where, according to Gracki, "Djebbar courageously reveals and writes about her own wound at the hands of her husband" and inscribes herself "in the age-old story of sororal bonds by becoming not only Isma's double but Hajila's as well."⁶

The focus on female solidarity expressed in *Ombre sultane* is displaced in *Vaste est la prison* by the exposure of the *failure* of relationships *between the sexes*, in a novel which throws up a violent marriage and an ultimately unsatisfactory affair. The love-story which opens the novel nevertheless stands out from the rest of Djebbar's writing as the site of the most raw self-exposure. Although Djebbar is itself a pseudonym, and although the narrator oscillates between first person and third person narration (between *je* and *elle-Isma*), there is a directness and openness about the writing which suggests that Djebbar, while hiding behind other names, is no longer hiding behind the multiple voices which have shielded her in the previous two semi-autobiographical novels.

Whereas in *L'Amour la fantasia* the Arabic language becomes the site of veneration, in the second part of *Vaste est la prison* Djebbar turns *against* her maternal tongue, exposing it as a patriarchal language which, like the society it owns, serves only to

⁵ Katherine Gracki, "Writing violence and the violence of writing in Assia Djebbar's Algerian quartet", *World Literature Today*, 70:4 (1996), pp. 835-43, p. 840. Gracki assumes that the first Part of *Vaste est la Prison* is autobiographical.

⁶ Ibid. , p. 840-41.

promote separation and antagonism between the sexes. Here Djébar swiftly turns her attention to another language, the ancient Berber language, which becomes the object not only of a historical quest (resuming the historical vein of *L'Amour, la fantasia*), but of Djébar's personal quest for "*une écriture des femmes*" (the Berber language is revealed to have been the privileged property of women: "Dans la société touareg, ce sont les femmes qui conservent l'écriture..."⁷).

Since the Berber language is also the language of Djébar's maternal grandmother, it is not surprising that this historical quest is followed by chapters which rewrite the stories of her female relatives and ancestors. This third part of the novel highlights the importance for Djébar of renewing matrilineal bonds, a feature shared with the third part of *L'Amour, la fantasia*. And, while *matrilineal* bonds are rediscovered at the ends of *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Vaste est la prison*, the final part of *Ombre sultane* privileges the *sororal* bond, staging a series of encounters between the two female protagonists, Isma and Hajila. Similarly, this feminine finale is repeated at the end of *Loin de Médine*, which builds up to a final crescendo of female voices.⁸

For Clarisse Zimra, *Loin de Médine*, while signaling "une rupture de ton" from the two semi-autobiographical works that precede it, does not represent what certain critics have interpreted as a change of direction in Djébar's writing, but rather maintains "un dialogue profond avec tous les autres textes signés de sa main."⁹ For her, Djébar's evocation of the powerful women of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic era remains firmly grounded in "la question de l'espace",¹⁰ women's entry into public space, a founding theme which she traces back from Djébar's first volley of novels through to *L'Amour, la fantasia*:

A la fois figure et sens, il [le jeu de l'espace] remet en question la représentation et le dire du corps féminin: question autour de laquelle

⁷ Lise Gauvin, "Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien", p. 76.

⁸ So the "architect" in Djébar constructs a "female structure" onto the end of each of these novels Djébar has often described her works in terms of architectural constructions (as well as musical ones). "Plusieurs fois, elle signale, au début de sa carrière d'écrivain, ce projet architectural, qui se mêle d'ailleurs, à une aspiration musicale." (see Jeanne-Marie Clerc, *Assia Djébar: écrire, transgresser, résister*, p. 125). According to Clarisse Zimra, Djébar has commented on her "architectural imagination" as "what is left of my youthful urge to become an architect" (unpub. Interview, 1992).

⁹ Clarisse Zimra, "Comment être musulmane: Assia Djébar repense Médine", pp. 57-63, p. 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Fantasia, ce roman va repenser le discours historique. *Loin de Médine*, dont les temps forts sont organisés autour de la conquête de l'espace par le corps féminin, ne saurait se comprendre sans cela.¹¹

Meanwhile Clerc also points to continuities, this time between *Loin de Médine* and the third semi-autobiographical work (*Vaste est la prison*) which Djébar returned to after *Médine*'s completion:

A travers la redécouverte de cette histoire des femmes de sa famille [in *Vaste est la prison*], l'auteur se trouve face à des "femmes en mouvement", opérant constamment "des passages qui peuvent être des fractures d'un lieu à l'autre, ou d'une langue à l'autre" C'est pourquoi les figures de femmes convoquées dans *Vaste* se situent dans la continuité de celles de *Loin de Médine*: ce sont des figures de "fugitives" dont les corps en mouvement disent la capacité de résistance face à la Loi qui veut les soumettre au confinement."¹²

As Djébar evokes a host of women in movement, another female figure, "l'Algérie-femme" (as she is called in *L'Amour, la fantasia*), whose increasing fanatisation was the catalyst for the writing of *Loin de Médine*, reimposes herself almost "like a character in a play"¹³ as an increasingly important figure in *Ombre sultane* and *Vaste est la prison*, firmly anchoring these novels in contemporary political reality.

Three French Feminists and One Arab scholar

Djébar's novels throw up three main areas in which her writing is in particular dialogue with the French feminists in question. These are linguistic style, woman's relationship to language, and relations between women. I will look at how each of these theorists deals with the areas of language and relations between women (as they pertain to my undertaking), and explain my choice of one specific theoretical approach in the case of each of the novels examined.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 58.

¹² Jeanne-Marie Clerc, *Assia Djébar: écrire, transgresser, résister*, p. 120-21.

¹³ In Evelyne Accad's article "Assia Djébar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision" it is "North African society (rather than Algeria herself) itself [that] emerges as a character in the play, a character complete with principles of choice and action, and with both trivial and tragic flaws." (see p. 811)

In proceeding with a variety of theoretical approaches, of matching each novel with a different theory, my aim is to evaluate Djébar's work in dialogue with a range of feminist thinkings. My choice of theorist in each case was dictated by the desire to find a match that would "naturally" stimulate dialogue and one which would promote a better understanding of the novels in question.

The common project of the French feminists is to privilege the neglected underside of the dually coded psychoanalytical system (whether designated as pre-oedipal/oedipal, unconscious/conscious, imaginary/symbolic, or maternal/paternal), to seek out the *buried maternal pre-oedipal bedrock* which underlies paternal, or symbolic, law and to articulate the debt which the symbolic owes to the feminine and the maternal.¹⁴ Kristeva's, Cixous's and Irigaray's understanding of language can thus be interpreted in the different ways that they each affirm "*the archaic force of the pre-oedipal*."¹⁵

Kristeva affirms the pre-oedipal relationship between mother and child with the idea of the *semiotic*. The semiotic phase is associated with the rhythmic, energetic series of forces which strive to multiply the pleasures, sounds, colours and movements experienced in a child's body during the intense maternal stage. She suggests that it is at this stage that the first traces of the signifying process are established, and that the chaotic pulsations of the semiotic represent the *pre-condition* for signification. But, like "the repressed", these semiotic articulations can return as irruptions within symbolic expression, and therefore function not only as the pre-condition of language, but also as its *excess*.¹⁶ For Kristeva, language is constituted as a dialectic process, as the constant interaction between the chaotic, libidinal force of the semiotic and the logical, controlling force of the symbolic.

Although Kristeva sees this dialectic as operating on three parallel levels, as the constitutive element not only of the linguistic, but also of the psychical and social orders of life, in my study of *L'Amour, la fantasia*, I have focused mainly on its

¹⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), p. 102.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Jaques Lacan: A feminist introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

linguistic manifestation. On a linguistic level, her dialectic can be utilised as a theoretical model to evaluate the way all texts function (forms of language can be characterised according to which disposition predominates - the semiotic or the symbolic). In evaluating the way Djébar's text functions, I decided to work within a Kristevan framework for two reasons. With regard to this particular novel, Kristeva's theory is useful both in terms of its capacity to straddle the book's generic multiplicity, offering the possibility of differentiating its consequent series of divergent stylistic registers (I explain later why a Cixousian or Irigarayan approach would be more limiting in this regard). Secondly, Kristeva's conception of language as the interaction of two modalities, provides a useful entry into the central issue which is played out in the novel, namely the interaction of maternal and paternal worlds/languages. In *L'Amour, la fantasia*, as in Kristeva's world, there are "struggles between powers and resistances on the margins of the symbolic, on the border between the paternal order and a (potentially psychotic) maternal imaginary."¹⁷

Although the semiotic and symbolic modalities are associated with the semiotic and symbolic functions respectively, they are not associated with feminine and masculine identities, but rather "within each subject and each social and signifying practice, there is a play of masculine/feminine, a play not of sexual difference, but of differentiation."¹⁸ Kristeva's conception of identity as interaction between two modalities leads her to reject any notions of a fixed identity or of any specifically gendered sexual identity. She also rejects any attempt to assign any specific linguistic (or political) identity to women, and is therefore opposed to any ideas of a specifically feminine language or *écriture féminine*, which in her view would only serve to essentialise "woman".

For Cixous, however, the pre-oedipal does have a special connection to women, and to a feminine libidinal economy, and it is this connection which is at the basis of her idea of *écriture féminine*¹⁹. Although Kristeva foregrounds the effects of the force of

¹⁷ Ibid. , p. 154.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, p. 69.

¹⁹ Although Cixous believes that women are more likely to be closer to a feminine libidinal economy than men, men too can enter into that economy, and produce feminine texts.

the pre-oedipal on the symbolic as transgressive, that transgression is eventually absorbed into the symbolic, and as such, leaves its dominance unchallenged. Cixous, on the other hand, also foregrounds the archaic force of the pre-oedipal, but does so in such a way as to bring about the possibility of *transforming* the symbolic.

Cixous believes that language is central to the hierarchical, oppositional, and repressive structures of thinking which construct the patriarchal socio-symbolic system, and sees language as the key to reformulating that system. Since woman has figured within man's socio-symbolic system only as lack, absence or other, Cixous believes that the inclusion of the other, that the *inscription* of a positive feminine sexuality and history could transform the system itself.²⁰ She sees a writing practice, based on the inclusion of the other, as the site and means of this transformation: "In particular, Cixous stresses that the inscription of the rhythms and articulations of the mother's body which continue to influence the adult self provide a link to the pre-symbolic union between self and m/other, and so affects the subject's relationship to language, the other, himself and the world".²¹

Cixous's repayment of the debt to the *archaic force of the pre-oedipal* is thus achieved by means of materially recasting its rhythms in language, by expressing (rather than repressing) the m/other in language, putting into being a revolutionary writing practice, *une écriture féminine*, that brings about alternative modes of expression, perception and relation to those dictated by the oppositional, hierarchical and *self*-referential masculine or paternal order.

Although the style of the next novel, *Vaste est la prison*, demonstrates only occasional irruptions of *écriture féminine*, its thematics find many echoes in Cixous's thinking. The two main themes which the novel elaborates are segregation (both in Algerian society and in the Arabic language), and the search for *une écriture des femmes*. Djébar's strong reaction against the segregation at work in the Arabic language seemed to find its echo in Cixous's rejection of patriarchal language on the basis of the oppositionary violence which it creates. Secondly, Cixous's response to that oppositionary violence, which takes the form of a search for an alternative mode

²⁰ Susan Sellers (ed.), *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. xxix.

of expression, or language, provides a way of reading Djébar's historical quest for a mysterious and ancient script: is she too, like Cixous, looking for another language, a woman's language, as a reaction to the divisive violence of masculine discourse? And does the comparison between a twentieth century feminist writing practice, *une écriture féminine*, and an ancient North African language, *une écriture des femmes*, end there?

Although Irigaray, like Cixous, questions the phallocentrism of masculine models of language and sexuality, unlike Cixous, she does not do so by establishing a new language. For Irigaray such a concept is not possible since she believes that a socio-symbolic system which refuses a female subjectivity contains no space which a woman may use in order to express her subjectivity, or, in other words, to speak as woman. So instead of creating a woman's language, Irigaray uses the existing language system to expose the underlying sexualisation of masculine discourses, demonstrating that these dominant discourses which pose as universal and neutral are in fact produced according to male interests: "She aims excessively to overburden existing forms of language and dominant discourses with their own ambiguities, the affirmations they unconsciously make, the materiality they refuse to acknowledge."²² This "overburdening" is achieved by a technique of self-conscious mimicry, involving extended and selective quotations of the discourses she seeks to undermine, which have the effect of making explicit what lies dormant within them, making the repressed maternal-feminine "conspicuous by its absence".

In Irigaray's thinking the buried maternal-feminine resurfaces again as the underside, the unconscious of discourse. She too affirms *the archaic force of the pre-oedipal*, by teasing out of the text its buried femininity, by giving speech to the unspoken, examining the absences and repressions contained within masculine discourses. As such, her approach has been compared to that of a psychoanalyst, whose "parole" (or whose writing) acts as the catalyst to unbind that which has been repressed.

Although I have not drawn extensively on Irigaray's mimetic strategies in my analysis of Djébar, it is possible to read such a strategy in Djébar's cynical evocation

²¹ Ibid. , p. xxix.

of metropolitan texts in *L'Amour, la fantasia*, just as it would be possible to look at this particular novel's use of voice, and inscriptions of female corporeality, in terms of Cixous's call to "write the body" (both approaches, would however, given limited access to the text as a whole). However, the analogy of Irigaray as the psychoanalyst to the "stars" (the Fathers of psychology and philosophy), releasing their feminine-unconscious, provides an entry into the next novel studied, *Ombre sultane*, whose narrative I argue also operates on the principle of the release of the feminine-unconscious (as I will explain below).

In any case, when it comes to the main issue addressed in *Ombre sultane*, namely, relationships between women, it is Irigaray's views on inter-subjective relations (rather than Cixous's or Kristeva's) which have most resonance with Djébar's thinking. Both Cixous and Irigaray draw on the features of the unconscious in their elaboration of inter-subjective relationships. But whereas Cixous believes that women can access or be open to the other/unconscious (in the context of a feminine writing which goes beyond the borders of the self towards the other), Irigaray believes that woman cannot yet access her *own* other, since she herself functions as man's other/as *his* unconscious, and that her lack of subjectivity precludes her from achieving positive (subject-to-subject) relations with others.

Irigaray believes that the dividing line between conscious and unconscious is drawn *between* the sexes (with man representing the conscious and woman his unconscious) rather than *within* them, and argues that each sex must have its own other in order for woman to come into being. What she is advocating then is a *double syntax*, a complete symbolic realignment leading to the coming into being of two separated or differentiated sexes, each with its own other, each acceding to subjectivity and relationality.

In *Ombre sultane*, Djébar presents a situation where a woman (Hajila) exists only as the shadow (*ombre*) of another woman's (Isma's) consciousness. This shadow-woman who has been trapped within the narrator-woman's consciousness (and has no consciousness of her own) is eventually *released* into the outside world. The

²² Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, p. 127.

shadow finally become form, as Hajila acquires a materiality and subjectivity of her own. Once this release or separation has occurred, the way is then left open for the two women, Isma and Hajila, to relate to each other as two differentiated or separate subjectivities.

The positive change in the relation between the two women is thus conditional on the release of the repressed shadow-woman. An Irigarayan approach to the novel enabled me to enter into the mechanics of that *narrative* change, which appears to “imitate” the conditions for *symbolic* change specified by Irigaray, namely the *release* of the repressed maternal-feminine. Since this release, in both Djébar’s narrative, and in Irigaray’s philosophy, satisfies the pre-condition for the coming into being of relationality, the interest for me was to relate Djébar’s conception of that relationality, expressed as sisterhood and embodied in the final encounters between Isma and Hajila, with Irigaray’s view of relationality, expressed as a woman’s sociality (or *entre femmes*), and elaborated in her blueprint for a future symbolic order.

An examination of the relationship between the two women, based on Cixous’s idea of Voice would have been possible, utilising the contrast between masculine voices which annihilate and destroy, and feminine voices which “watch over and save [the other]...”²³ This approach would have drawn on the way in which the narratorial voice shadows, or “covers” the other woman, and the way in which the narrator, like Cixous, embarks on the project of “writing you”²⁴ in such a way that propels her (beyond the self-interest of the ego) towards the other woman. However, Irigaray’s specific focus on relationships between women, which she elaborates both negatively in relation to the current symbolic, and positively in relation to another symbolic (in which relations between women would be restructured), has particular resonances in Djébar’s work. This is particularly striking when it comes to Irigaray’s concept of this restructured relationship being constructed on the basis of a *reciprocal duality*, a theme which finds an echo both in the interaction between the main narrator-shadow couple and in that of the mythical counter-couple, Shéhérazade and Dinarzade.

²³ Susan Sellers (ed.), *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, p. 83.

²⁴ See Hélène Cixous, (*With*) *Ou l’art de l’innocence* (Paris: des femmes, 1981), pp. 256-71.

The specific historical period covered by the final novel, *Loin de Médine*, opens up a dialogue with areas of feminist scholarship other than those circumscribed by the French feminists, namely with the general principles of feminist historical scholarship, and more specifically, with that of Arab feminist historical scholarship. With regard to the latter, I have drawn on historian Leila Ahmed's book, *Women and Gender in Islam – Historical roots of Modern Debate*²⁵, which, like *Loin de Médine*, covers (amongst other historical periods) the history of pre-Islamic Arabia and the founding discourses of Islam, but does so from a perspective which problematises Djébar's approach.

In *Loin de Médine*, Djébar goes back to the roots of Islam and attempts to reclaim the religion for women, going so far as to say that the Islamic age heralded "une révolution féministe". Ahmed's exploration of the historical roots of Islam reveals a more ambiguous relation between women and Islam, raising the following questions: Can Islam really be reclaimed for women? And is it really possible for Djébar to invent a politically correct Islam?

Literature Review

A review of secondary literature reveals that while feminist and pseudo-feminist readings of Djébar's *oeuvre* dominate the critical scene, none of these feminist interpretations have engaged with the specifics of feminist theoretical positions, as I propose to do.

The two books dedicated to Djébar's works are Déjeux's *Assia Djébar romancière algérienne, cinéaste arabe*, and Jeanne-Marie Clerc's *Assia Djébar: Ecrire, Transgresser*. Déjeux's work covers Djébar's work up to *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, and signals her importance as the first Algerian writer to have written the body: "Assia Djébar avait osé prendre la parole pour dire 'une soif étrange', le

²⁵ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992). Edward Said paid the following tribute to this work: "Ahmed's book is a serious and independent-minded analysis of its subject, the best-informed, most sympathetic and reliable one that exists today. It is most compelling in its absence of clichés and hedgings, and more than anyone before her Ahmed discusses women and gender in Islam as lived and contested reality." (Quotation taken from back cover of book).

langage du corps...”²⁶ He pinpoints the founding themes which will themselves “circulate” within her *oeuvre*: “la conquête du regard ... la circulation dans l’espace masculin ... la liberté de parler ... le dévoilement du corps”.²⁷ Although Déjeux touches on these “feminist” themes, these are related to textual examples rather than to theoretical predications.

Clerc’s interest in Djebbar’s work centres on the relation between Djebbar’s cinematic and literary careers, and focuses, in particular, on the instances where there is evidence of considerable interaction between novel and film (such as between *L’Amour, la fantasia* and *La Noubia des femmes du Mont Chenoua*). Although the inter-action between the two is in itself of interest to her, she also points to the way the one (cinema) has had an effect on the other (writing), notably in the areas of style. Although Clerc foregrounds Djebbar’s “new style of writing” as “image-son”²⁸, this comparison is nevertheless exploited in terms of cinematic rather than feminist interests (as in the case of my research).

In reviewing a selection of articles on Djebbar’s *oeuvre*, I will move from the general to the particular, starting with an article by Accad which assesses Assia Djebbar’s work in relation to trends in Arab Women’s literature. Accad follows this genre through its various stages of development: from the search for personal identity, through political commitment and eventual disillusionment with the political process, towards “true maturity”, a state which she believes that Djebbar has achieved and which she equates with a writer’s realisation “that the self - and its freedom - cannot be separated from the entire social context.”²⁹

Despite the very general sweep of Accad’s approach, she touches on the specifics of the argument I will elaborate in my chapter on *Loin de Médine*. Accad believes that *Loin de Médine*’s collusion with tradition presents a fundamental inconsistency, pointing out that the novel’s “glorification of the Prophet and his women” stands in direct contradiction to its injunction to women to revolt. For she asks “if, in order to

²⁶ Jean Déjeux, *Assia Djebbar romancière algérienne, cinéaste arabe* (Québec: Naaman, 1984), p.16.

²⁷ Ibid. , (see sections on pages 36, 39, 43, 45)

²⁸ Ibid , p. 13.

²⁹ Ibid. , p. 802.

free oneself, one ought to leave tradition and its enslavement, then how can one look on it [early Islamic history] as a beautiful past filled with role models?³⁰ In my chapter on *Loin de Médine*, I look for the textual evidences of this conflict between feminist and Islamic allegiances, but also look to the historical background of the question of Islam and gender in order to elucidate the ideological presuppositions which underpin that conflict.

Several other general articles have approached the second volley of Djébar's *oeuvre* either thematically, trying to find a unifying theme to her writing, or from the broader perspective of analyzing her writing practice. An example of the latter would be an article by Huughe which rejects the interpretation of Djébar's writing practice as a process of *dévoilement*, claiming that Djébar is in fact trying to *escape* the dialectic of exposure and concealment by "playing with the veil, by 'writing like a veil' ", since by unveiling herself, Djébar would agree to become the target of voyeurs.³¹

According to Huughe, Djébar consciously chooses to veil herself" (both by adopting a pseudonym, and by hiding behind the French language) in order to "escape the panoptic gaze" of "homo Islamicus", but in doing so paradoxically exposes herself to the gaze of the Other-colonizer. Huughe suggests that in order to protect herself from this second exposure brought about by writing in the language of the Other, Djébar chooses to mask the enemy's language, to Arabise her French, and to conceal herself behind the voices of her Algerian sisters. Although Djébar's "arabisation" of the French language is undoubtedly a reaction against colonial domination, as Huughe suggests, it can also be interpreted as a reaction against *paternal* domination (French is the paternal language in the sense that it is her father who introduces her to the French language³²) and, as I suggest in my chapter on *L'Amour, la fantasia*, as a conscious move to incorporate the rhythms of the *maternal* language.

³⁰ Ibid. , p.810. I explore this contradiction further in my chapter on *Loin de Médine*.

³¹ Barrada Smaoui, "Assia Djébar; Comment travaillent les écrivains.", *Jeune Afrique*, 27 June 1984, pp. 68/9. Quoted in Laurence Huughe, "Ecrire comme un voile: The Problematics of the Gaze in the Work of Assia Djébar", *World Literature Today*, 70:4 (1996), pp. 867-876, p. 867.

³² For Monique Gadant, Djébar writes not only against the coloniser but also against the Father (whose assimilation with France strips him of symbolic power), see footnote 64.

Those critics who wish to find a unifying theme in Djébar's work have more often than not taken to "feminist" themes if not to specific feminist theories. I have selected "feminine voices", and the "wounded female body" as examples of this type of approach. For Budig-Markin, the search for identity in Djébar's second volley of novels is based on "ce principe de la libération réalisé par la voix", a phenomenon which she associates with women writers from third world cultures: "Les principes d'une recherche d'identité pour les cultures du tiers monde et doublement pour les femmes écrivains relèvent de la voix supprimée par les discours de pouvoir La nouvelle histoire comprenant la trace orale des subjugués et l'autobiographie d'une auteure du tiers monde est une recherche de libération multiple".³³ Turning her attention to each of Djébar's later novels, she charts her intent to liberate the silenced voices of Algerian women, past and present. However, at no point does she draw on the connection between Djébar's use of voice and French feminist ideals of *écriture*, where voice (in the case of Cixous, in particular) is seen as the distinguishing mark of "la féminité dans l'écriture".³⁴

For Gracki, the image upon which Djébar's works are predicated is that of women's wounded bodies: "bleeding, suffering, and mutilated bodies often described in meticulous detail."³⁵ Gracki demonstrates how violence inscribes itself onto women's bodies throughout the *oeuvre*. In particular she points to intertextualities between the semi-autobiographical works in which similar moments of violence are repeated against different women. For her, the significance of this doubling of experiences lies not so much in the "proof" they provide of veiled autobiographical material, but rather in the centrality accorded to the doubling of feminine identities in Djébar's elaboration of sisterhood.³⁶ Gracki's focus on negative manifestations of the corporeal nevertheless by-passes Djébar's positive inscriptions of female sexuality, an important theme which straddles her entire corpus and is particularly

³³ Ginette Adamson, Jean-Marc Gouanvic (eds) *Francophonie Plurielle* (Quebec: Hurtubise HMH, 1995), pp. 21-28, pp. 22, 21. Quoted in Valérie Budig-Markin, "*La Voix, l'historiographie: Les dernières oeuvres d'Assia Djébar*".

³⁴ Hélène Cixous (in collaboration with Catherine Clément), *La Jeune Née* (Paris: UGE, 10/18, 1975), p. 170.

³⁵ Katherine Gracki, "Writing Violence and the Violence of Writing in Assia Djébar's Algerian quartet, p. 835.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 838.

evident in novels such as *Les Alouettes naïves* (1967), *Vaste est la prison*, and especially *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*.

Moving on to articles which focus on specific novels, two of the novels in Djébar's second volley have attracted particular attention from critical sources – *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Loin de Médine*.³⁷ Both Gadant and Zimra problematise feminist interpretations of *L'Amour, la fantasia* – Gadant, because she believes Djébar's brand of feminism to be ineffectual, and Zimra, because she considers that particular novel to be an anti-colonial rather than a feminist manifesto.

For Gadant, *L'Amour, la fantasia*'s transgressive or subversive intent is *hampered* by its commitment to the nationalist cause (with its suspicion of Western and therefore feminist ideals), and is further disabled by the return to feminine spaces, which for her smacks of an escapist a-historicism which retards the feminist cause (“Elle plaide pour le harem protecteur et tous les interdits imposés aux femmes pour les mettre à l’abri, hors de l’histoire”³⁸). Gadant ends by dismissing Djébar's definition of feminism, “féminisme en milieu arabo-musulman, c’est comment retrouver une tradition ancienne, une tradition perdue”,³⁹ as imprisoning women in the past, and as negating any possibility of change in women's status in the present. I argue, however, in my Irigarayan reading of *Ombre sultane*, that Djébar's predilection for “feminine spaces”, rather than imprisoning women, provides a way of opening up a space specific to woman, enabling them to relate freely to one another, while her desire to revive “a forgotten tradition” is what Irigaray describes as part of a necessary project for women, that of rediscovering lost female genealogies.⁴⁰

³⁷ There are very few articles which examine the other two novels *Ombre sultane* and *Vaste est la prison* on an individual basis and that is why they have not been treated individually in this section.

³⁸ Monique Gadant, “La permission de dire ‘je’: Réflexions sur les femmes et l’écriture à propos d’un roman d’Assia Djébar, *L'Amour, la fantasia*.”, *Peuples Méditerranéens*, 48-49 (July-December 1989), pp. 93-105, p.103.

³⁹ Ibid. , p.104. The quotation is an extract from an interview with Assia Djébar about *Ombre sultane* (France-culture, in a programme entitled “Un livre, des voix”, 1987).

⁴⁰ See “Le mystère oublié des généalogies féminines”, *Le Temps de la différence* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1989), pp. 101-23.

In her engaging article on *L'Amour, la fantasia*, Zimra reads Djébar intertextually (and intercessionally⁴¹). Zimra describes Djébar's engagement with colonial painting and writing as the staging of colonial power as a *failure* in scriptive and visual representation, and as undermining "the programmed binary relationship of Orientalism, by excavating the conditions for its production".⁴² And it is because Zimra views Djébar as "triangulating" amongst Western images and texts that she argues that Djébar writes primarily not as a woman but as an Algerian. This interpretation, while foregrounding Djébar's engagement with colonial history, nevertheless overlooks Djébar's elaboration of a specifically *feminine* and revolutionary counter-history, which suggests that she writes both as an Algerian and as a woman.

As far as *Loin de Médine* is concerned, we find critics, such as Woodhull, who engage negatively with French feminism. Woodhull, believes that the residues of an "a-political 1970's French feminism" threatens to *subvert* the political goals of the novel, which she interprets as the "liberating transformation" of woman's status in Muslim societies. Woodhull interprets Djébar's injunction for women to revolt, to break free "loin de Médine", as a call for women to "run away" from the power-centers of Islam (rather than engaging with them politically), and proceeds to lay this political disengagement at the feet of what is dubiously described as an a-historical, a-political type of French feminist thinking.⁴³ Although Djébar's positive treatment of rebellious "run-away" non-Muslim women (*femmes insoumises*) does send mixed messages, I do not identify this ambiguity as arising from her desire to accommodate the freedoms of a "disengaged French feminism", but rather as rooted in her desire to project the freedoms (including political freedoms) associated with the women of the

⁴¹ See Clarisse Zimra, "Disorienting the Subject in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*". As far as the intercessional aspect of the novel is concerned, Zimra suggests that the whole text is predicated on Eugène Fromentin's reluctance to paint the gruesome atrocity of female dismemberment (Fromentin comes across the dismembered hand of an Algerian woman which he then shies away from). For Zimra, the hand emasculates a painter who runs away from his own entry into colonial history, thus making possible the granddaughter's [i.e., Djébar's] intercession.

⁴² Ibid., p. 156.

⁴³ Winifred Woodhull, "Feminism and Islamic tradition", *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, 17:1 (1993), pp. 27-44., p. 42. Note that Woodhull later qualifies this judgement, finding enough evidence of political will in the novel to quell her doubts as to its political soundness.

pre-Islamic age onto the women of Islam, a religion described by Djébar as “le contraire de la contrainte”.⁴⁴

Geesey on the other hand happily situates *Loin de Médine* in relation to French feminism, citing Cixous’s injunction to woman to “put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement”. However, she proceeds to claim that the novel has no subversive intent, a position alien to Cixous’s interpretation of the aims of textual production. Geesey’s main interest in the novel is in Djébar’s method of authenticating her texts; she claims that the “chains of women’s words portrayed in *Loin de Médine* consciously evoke the chain of transmission (*Isnad*) that must be established to *authenticate a hadith*...”⁴⁵ According to Geesey, “Djébar’s effort to establish a link between her ‘revision’ project and the pattern followed by *Hadith* transmission and authentication” is proof enough that the novel is “not a ‘subversive’ re-reading that overturns any patriarchal limitations or interpretations on women’s status” but rather one that favours continuity with the past “posit[ing] a relationship between her fictional narrative and an established body of texts whose interpretation has been controlled by men.”⁴⁶

I have now set the scene for another chain of words (my own) which will hopefully *authenticate* this introduction.

⁴⁴ Assia Djébar, *Loin de Médine* (Paris: Albin Michel, Livre de Poche, 1991), p. 193.

⁴⁵ Ibid. , p. 43. “The Hadith are sayings attributed to Muhammad and brief narratives about his life and those of his companions, transmitted orally and then written down after the death of the Prophet”.

⁴⁶ Ibid. , p. 46. My emphasis.

In dialogue with Kristeva: *L'Amour, la fantasia*

Introduction

L'Amour, la fantasia, the first volume of the Algerian quartet, draws on Djébar's multiple talents to create a potent mixture of history and autobiography, as both her own past and her country's past are summoned up with a vivid cinematographic sweep. "Quasi una fantasia", Beethoven's instruction to his Piano Sonatas Op. 27 1 and 2 (the Moonlight Sonata), appears as the epigraph to the final part of the novel, suggesting the exhilarating freedom of the experimental fantasias, a musical arrangement which liberated form, rhythm and tempo. Mimicking the freedom of movement of this musical fantasia, *L'Amour, la fantasia* moves fluidly between the French conquest of Algeria, Djébar's own youth under French colonial rule in the mid-20th century, and the Algerian War of Liberation.

"Fantasia" also recalls the maghreban *fantazia* "a set of virtuoso movements on horseback executed at a gallop, accompanied by loud cries and culminating in rifle shots"¹. Djébar's *fantasia* stylistically reproduces the movements of this ceremonial *fantazia*, as the skilled manoeuvres of the riders find their echo in an extravaganza of expertly manipulated language, with the sudden climax of rifles resounding in the unexpected outbursts of poetic prose.

The fluid linguistic movements of the novel recall the constant alternation of modalities which for Julia Kristeva constitutes the marker of an ideal text. For Kristeva, identity and language are in process, a process constituted in the incessant interaction between semiotic and symbolic modalities. Does *L'Amour, la fantasia* favour one modality over the other, or does it achieve what Kristeva terms as the impossible dialectic of the two terms - a permanent alternation? "Who" asks Kristeva "is capable of this permanent alternation?":

"Une alternance constante entre le temps et sa 'vérité', l'identité et sa perte, l'histoire et ce qui la produit hors-temps, hors-phénomène. Dialectique

¹ Assia Djébar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Casablanca: EDDIF, 1992), trans. Dorothy Blair, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (London: Quartet, 1988). The quotation is taken from Blair's introduction (effectively fourth page, no page numbers cited). First published by J.-C. Lattès in 1985.

impossible des deux termes, alternance permanente: jamais l'un sans l'autre. Il n'est pas sûr que quelqu'un en soit capable ici, maintenant. Peut-être une femme?"²

Perhaps a woman? Perhaps Djébar?

Kristeva and Identity

Kristeva's concept of the development of feminist politics in three distinct phases will serve as a model against which *L'Amour, la fantasia* will be examined. Before looking at this model and proceeding to a Kristevan reading of the work, I will examine Kristeva's theory of identity which informs both her concept of psycholinguistics and her politics.

Kristeva's theory of identity adopts Lacan's opposition of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, reformulating it as the alternation between the semiotic and the symbolic. Despite their differences³, Kristeva accepts the existence of Lacan's Symbolic Order, the patriarchal order of language and culture which constructs the subject's sense of identity: "The Kristevan symbolic, like Lacan's own, is founded on repression, on the 'splitting' of the subject into conscious and unconscious, signifier and signified."⁴ One significant area where Kristeva diverges from Lacan is in her shift away from his emphasis on the Oedipal father, and her focus on the pre-Oedipal mother-child relationship, which she describes in terms of the semiotic. The main concepts associated with Kristeva's concept of identity can be described as follows:

The semiotic

"The semiotic refers to the first, pre-verbal but already social ordering of reality during the earliest pre-Oedipal stage of infancy."⁵ At this stage the child has no separate identity from its mother, and experiences life as part of a continuum with the maternal body. This semiotic existence is characterised by "les pulsions orales et

² Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises* (Paris: des femmes, 1974). p. 44.

³ For an analysis of the relation between Kristevan and Lacanian thought, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 147-69.

⁴ Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the problem of the subject* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987), p.17.

⁵ Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 198.

anales, dirigées et structurées toutes deux par rapport au corps de la mère”⁶ These rhythms of heartbeat and pulse, dark and light, hot and cold, the regular intaking and outgiving of breath, food and faeces translate into a range of sensory experiences which literally and metaphorically start to *make* sense: “Oralité, audition, vision: modalités archaïques sur lesquelles se produira la discrétion la plus précoce. Le sein donné et retiré; la lumière de la lampe captant le regard; le son intermittent de la voix ou de la musique ... Alors, le sein, la lumière, le son deviennent un *là*: lieu, point, repère.”⁷ It is in the gradual ordering and patterning of this endless flow of pulsations, which are gathered into the semiotic “chora”, that Kristeva sees the emergence of the basis of signification.

The chora

The “chora”, by nature an almost indefinable entity, is the “home” of semiotic pulsations, and is characterised by its mobility and resistance to fixity:

Nous empruntons le terme de chora à Platon dans le *Timée* pour désigner une articulation toute provisoire, essentiellement mobile, constituée de mouvements et de leurs stases éphémères Sans être encore une position qui représente quelque chose pour quelqu’un, c’est-à-dire sans être un signe, la chora n’est pas non plus une position qui représente quelqu’un pour une autre position, c’est-à-dire qu’elle n’est pas encore un signifiant; mais elle s’engendre en vue d’une telle position signifiante. Ni modèle, ni copie, elle est antérieure et sous-jacente à la figuration donc à la spécularisation, et ne tolère d’analogies qu’avec le rythme vocal ou kinésique.”⁸

This rhythmic space “without thesis or position”, without unity or identity, is nevertheless subject to a regulating process, characterised by constant but irregular irruptions “une réglementation, différente de celle de la loi symbolique, mais qui n’effectue pas moins des discontinuités en les articulant provisoirement, et en recommençant continuellement”.⁹ As the child grows and “progresses”¹⁰ socially, the distinguishing features of the pulsations begin to be identifiable: “Freinée par les contraintes des structures biologiques et sociales, la charge pulsionnelle subit donc

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), p.26.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris, Seuil, 1977), pp. 480, 481

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, p. 23, p. 23-24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

des stases: son frayage se fixe provisoirement et marque des *discontinuités* dans ce qu'on peut appeler les différents matériaux sémiotisables - la voix, les gestes, les couleurs."¹¹

We can imagine the semiotic chora in "the cry, the sounds, and the gestures of the baby. In the adult discourse the semiotic functions as rhythm, prosody, word-games, the no-sense of sense, laughter".¹² These cries, sounds and gestures or semiotic rhythms, both provide and remain the foundation of all language and represent the basis of signification. The semiotic, characterised by flow, fluidity, rhythm and movement, although providing the basis of meaning, is distinguished from signification itself, which is characterised by definition, unity, and fixed positions. If signification and indeed identity are to be produced, then the semiotic continuum, the state of child/mother indifferenciation must be split - a split which Kristeva terms "le thétique".

The thetic phase

Nous distinguerons le sémiotique (les pulsations et leurs articulations) du domaine de la signification, qui est toujours celui d'une proposition ou d'un jugement; c'est-à-dire un domaine de *positions*. Cette positionnalité, que la phénoménologie husserlienne orchestre à travers les concepts de *doxa*, de *position* et de *thèse*, se structure comme une coupure dans le procès de la signifiante, instaurant l'*identification* du sujet et de ses objets comme conditions de la propositionnalité. Nous appellerons cette coupure produisant la position de la signification, une phase *thétique*.¹³

The thetic phase enables the subject to attribute differences, and therefore signification, to what was previously the ceaseless heterogeneity of the chora. This phase therefore marks the threshold between the semiotic and the symbolic. In this threshold position the "thetic" functions as a powerful controlling mechanism. Without the impetus of "thetic control", the semiotic has the potential to overwhelm the symbolic, and to dominate language with the force of its unconscious drives,

¹⁰ Note that Kristeva's phraseology implies that she equates social progress with semiotic regression.

¹¹ Ibid. , p. 28. My emphasis.

¹² Julia Kristeva, "Sujet dans la langage[sic] et pratique politique, in Armando Verdiglione, *Psychanalyse et Politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), p. 62. Quoted in "Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytical Politics: Freud's French Revolution* (London: Burnett, 1979), p. 82.

transforming it into psychotic utterance. In other words, the subject who cannot or will not adapt to the symbolic, who consciously or unconsciously retreats into the semiotic, is in danger of suffering from insanity.

The symbolic

Le thétique permet la constitution de l'ordre symbolique avec toute la stratification verticale de celui-ci (réfèrent, signifié, signifiant) et toutes les modalités de l'articulation logico-sémantique qui s'ensuivent. Commencé au "stade du miroir" et achevé, à travers la phase phallique, par la réactivation pubertaire de l'OEdipe, il ne peut rester ignoré d'aucune pratique signifiante. Mais sa nécessité absolue n'est pas exclusive: le sémiotique qui le précède, le déchire constamment, et cette transgression occasionne toutes les transformations de la pratique signifiante: c'est ce qu'on appelle la "création".¹⁴

Kristeva follows Lacan in positing the mirror phase as the first step in the detachment from the chora, and the Oedipal phase as the moment at which the splitting or thetic rupture is achieved. Once thetic detachment has occurred, and the subject enters into the symbolic order, "the *chora* will be more or less successfully repressed and can be perceived only as pulsational *pressure* on symbolic language: as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences in the symbolic language."¹⁵ It is this pulsational semiotic pressure on language which Kristeva associates with the creative process, creative language and "le langage poétique" in particular.

Kristeva and language.

Language in Kristevan terms is thus a dialectic between its two modalities - the semiotic and the symbolic. Discourse is produced as a process, dependent on the interrelation of the two modalities, rather than as a static order of meaning: "Ces deux modalités sont inséparables dans le *procès de la signifiante* qui constitue le langage, et la dialectique de l'une et de l'autre définit les types de discours

¹³ Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, p.41.

¹⁴ Ibid. , p. 61-62.

¹⁵ Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 162.

(narration, métalangue, théorie, poésie, etc.): c'est dire que le langage dit 'naturel' tolère différents modes d'articulation du sémiotique et du symbolique.¹⁶

Morris characterises language that tends towards the symbolic as being "objective" or "extrovert", in the sense that it is being directed towards the object world of other people and things.¹⁷ It aims at making itself understood, at enabling social interaction to take place, and its disposition is therefore towards fixed and unitary definition. This need for definition can be understood as an urge to control what is other (the semiotic) and potentially threatening to the self.

The origins of the semiotic modality on the other hand "lie in the non-gendered libidinal drives of the pre-Oedipal phase" so that its disposition is towards "meaning as a continuum". It tends towards identification (with the maternal body) rather than separation (via thethetic) from what is other. The symbolic disposition imposes the necessary uniformity of meaning and syntactical structure to allow for social communication, while the semiotic destabilises the urge for fixity, "producing a 'revolution' in the controlling force of the symbolic so as to ensure the generative potential for new meaning".¹⁸ Language that allows more opening to the "revolutionary" force of the semiotic is termed "poetic language": "Mais ce fait est surtout évident dans le langage poétique, puisque, pour que la transgression du symbolique se réalise, l'irruption pulsionnelle se produit dans l'ordre signifiant universel, celui du langage "naturel" qui soude l'unité sociale."¹⁹

The "transgression" of the symbolic manifests itself as "semiotic irruptions" which are characterised by rhythmic qualities, a heightening of sound patterning and disruption of syntax. Communication is a threshold between the pressure of this semiotic disruption and the controlling force of the symbolic, which Kristeva describes as a dialogue between unconscious desire ("I say what I like") and the social ("I say for you").²⁰

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, p. 22.

¹⁷ Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, p. 144.

¹⁸ Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, p. 145.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, p. 62.

²⁰ Toril Moi, *The Kristeva Reader* (Blackwell, Oxford 1986), p.316. This quotation is taken from "Psychoanalysis and the Polis". No references to the original French version are provided.

A Kristevan model

Kristeva views the semiotic/symbolic dialectic as operating on three parallel levels, as the constitutive element not only of the linguistic and the psychical, but also of the social order of life. This concept is also used as a basis of her interpretation of the development of the women's movement. She views the feminist struggle historically and politically as developing in three distinct phases, summarised as follows by Toril Moi:

1. Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality.
2. Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. Retreat into the semiotic. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
3. (This is Kristeva's own position.) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical.²¹

Although Kristeva is not directly critical of the early liberal feminists (phase 1), she points out that their desire to be part of the symbolic order presupposes an unquestioning acceptance of that order and essentially leaves the existing order unchallenged. Furthermore, this desire can be interpreted as a desire for the recognition of the other, implying a sense of identity derived from that other. She reserves harsher criticism towards those radical feminists (phase 2) who reject the male symbolic order in search of a maternal or semiotic utopia. Their construction of an idealised counter-society, is seen by Kristeva as a denial of historic reality. Just as the semiotic may overwhelm language producing psychosis, so a return to an imagined semiotic order represents not only a potential threat to individual women but a danger to the feminist movement as a whole for "to opt out of the symbolic altogether is, for her [Kristeva], to opt out of history".²² What Kristeva advocates therefore is a threshold position - *a balance between the two modalities*, "a permanent alternation" between the semiotic and the symbolic, between control and disruption and between the unconscious and the social, a balance which she advocates not only in political life, but also in literary production.

Kristeva's model can be summarised as follows:

²¹ Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 12.

²² Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, p. 146.

1. The symbolic mode
2. The semiotic mode
3. A balance between the two.

Using this model as a framework, I would like to suggest that the text of *L'Amour, la fantasia* displays all three tendencies. I propose to compare the impact of the semiotic on all three parts of the novel and to establish whether Djébar manages to achieve "a permanent alternation of the two modalities" in the final part of the work. I will start by looking at the subject and form of the work, as a background to my analysis of its tripartite structure, using Kristeva's notion of "écriture".

The plural subject

Je ne suis pas prisonnier de l'Histoire. Je ne dois pas y chercher le sens de ma destinée.

Je dois me rappeler à tout instant que le véritable *saut* consiste à introduire l'invention dans l'existence.

Dans le monde où je m'achemine, je me crée interminablement.²³

In *L'Amour, la fantasia* Djébar, like Franz Fanon, refuses to be a prisoner of history - history is hers for the making - but she does look into the past, her own past and Algeria's past to seek the meaning of her destiny: "l'histoire est utilisée dans ce roman comme quête de l'identité. Identité non seulement des femmes mais de tout le pays."²⁴ In the many worlds through which *L'Amour, la fantasia* travels, and travels fast, Djébar recreates herself, her people and her nation in a perpetual and multiple search for an identity:

L'écriture instaure une légalité autre. Soutenue non pas par le sujet de l'entendement, mais par un sujet dédoublé voire pluralisé qui occupe non pas un lieu d'énonciation, mais des places *permutables, multiples et mobiles*..."²⁵
[My emphasis]

"Djébar-enfant, Djébar-femme, L'Algérie-femme, Femmes d'Algérie" are the *multiple* subjects of *L'Amour, la fantasia*, which tells the story of these subjects in

²³ Franz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1965, p. 206).

²⁴ Quotation of Djébar's taken from Mildred Mortimer, "Entretien avec Assia Djébar, écrivain algérien," *Research in African Literatures*, 19:2 (1988), pp. 197-205, p. 201.

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue*, p. 43-44. My emphasis.

the process of re-establishing a sense of self in the face of colonial/patriarchal subjugation.

These subjects occupy "*des places permutables*": in Parts 1 and 2, the chapters alternate between historical and autobiographical sections, between incidents from the first historical sequence, the French conquest of Algeria, on the one hand, and autobiographical fragments drawn from Djébar's childhood, adolescence and early adulthood on the other. In these first two parts of the work, the constant displacement of subjects, between "L'Algérie-femme" and "Djébar-femme/enfant", is balanced by moments of condensation, nodal points where clusters of associated feelings, memories and desires come together, simultaneously evoking history and her story, past and present.

Djébar uses Beethoven's instruction to his Piano Sonatas Op. 27 1 and 2, "quasi una fantasia", as the epigraph for Part 3, with reference to a composition in which style and form take second place to flights of the imagination²⁶. This final part is divided into 5 movements, highlighting its musical associations. Here the displacement of subjects continues at a dizzying pace as the text moves faster, more fluidly, back and forth, from autobiographical incidents from the life of "Djébar-enfant" and "Djébar-femme" to the voices of "les femmes d'Algérie", "Mères de la Révolution" – the women who took part in the struggle for independence.

Djébar's interviews with these revolutionaries resulted in their oral testimonies being reproduced within the text, providing the basis for the second historical sequence covered, the War of Independence.²⁷ The simplicity and terseness of these transliterated oral testimonies provide a sharp and deliberate contrast not only to the

²⁶ "In the 18th century, the exhilarating freedom of the fantasy extended beyond form and concept to rhythm and tempo. Beethoven undertook some significant experiments under the guise of the fantasia. His two piano sonatas, Op. 27 1 and 2, the second of which is the familiar Moonlight Sonata, are marked "quasi una fantasia", and find him wrestling with irregular movement and form. These two sonatas are possibly the first large-scale fantasia to be cast in separate movements. The Moonlight Sonata is relayed without a break - it comprises an opening triplet-dominated adagio, a central musical-like dance that is neither minuet nor scherzo, and a closing sonata-form presto." (The Ultimate Encyclopaedia of Classical Music, p. 92.).

²⁷ The *Front de Libération nationale*(FLN) which led the armed insurrection against the French was founded in 1954. Independence was declared on July 5 1962.

written testimonies of the colonisers, incorporated in Parts 1 and 2, but also to the richness of Djébar's own virtuoso use of the French language.

The subject of *L'Amour, la fantasia* occupies "*des places mobiles*". Although Djébar moves backwards and forwards through time and place in alternating chapters of Parts 1 and 2, the historical and autobiographical sections are themselves loosely chronological. The historical sections progress from the events building up to the conquest of Algiers (13 June to 4 July 1830) in Part 1, to selected incidents from the lengthy period of consolidation in Part 2 (1840 to 1845). Similarly, the autobiographical sections progress from stories from Djébar's childhood to incidents from her adolescence and early adulthood (moving from the Algerian village of her youth to "La France" which she encounters as an adult).

In Part 3, however, chronological linearity is completely abandoned, as Djébar draws in strands from both childhood and adult life, and revisits historical incidents from Algeria's close and distant past (1830-1950). The distinction between autobiography and biography is also blurred as Djébar takes on the voice of her compatriots, and tells not only her story but their stories. Finally history and fiction also merge as Djébar incorporates fictional characters into her reconstruction of historical events.

In this chapter, I will use Kristeva's 3 phases as a model for my study of the three parts of Djébar's novel, which I have divided into four sections:

Symbolic mode:	1. Parts 1 and 2 - historical
	2. Parts 1 and 2 - autobiographical
Semiotic mode:	3. Parts 1 and 2 - poetical
Balance between the two modes?	4. Part 3

The symbolic mode - historical sections - Parts 1 and 2

To opt out of the symbolic is, according to Kristeva, to opt out of time: "L'ordre symbolique - ordre de la communication verbale, ordre paternel de la généalogie filiale - est un ordre temporel. Pour l'animal parlant, il est l'horloge du temps objectif; c'est lui qui donne le repère et, en conséquence, toute capacité de mesurer

en découpant un avant, un présent et un après”.²⁸ The historical sections of *L'Amour, la fantasia* are placed within strict temporal and spatial boundaries, within the limits of the *symbolic order*. But to what extent do semiotic irruptions disrupt the uniformity of meaning and syntactical structure dictated by that order?

Invasion - Part 1

Chapter 1²⁹ of Part 1 describes the dramatic “dawn” of colonial power, as the French navy first approaches the shores of Algiers. As “La France” comes face to face with “l’Algérie -femme”, the “Empire” does not “write back” but rather looks back. The returning gaze of “L’Algérie-femme” asks her assailant to recognise her identity and humanity, in the face of the de-humanising threat of subjugation experienced as rape.

“Whereas the play is created before us at every performance, the film is more like a record of something that happened, or is happening, only once.”³⁰ The opening paragraphs bring the on-coming ships into view with a strikingly visual, cinematic impact. A series of panoramic long shots suffused by muted colours and sounds create a sense of presence, an illusion of history happening before our very eyes. This illusion of history in the making is reinforced by the use of the present tense.

The tension perceptible in the silence and near immobility of the scene is a tension pervaded by desire. Although this historical reconstruction is placed within the symbolic boundaries of space and time, “Aube de ce 13 juin 1830” (p. 18), Djébar subverts the symbolic overtones by pushing back the boundaries of thetic control and allowing desire to flood in. By transposing a historical relationship onto the plane of desire, the text demonstrates an anti-symbolic stand, reinforced on a linguistic level by sudden irruptions of the semiotic. The semiotic is present in the occasional heightening of sound patterning, in the contrast of sound and silence, in the foregrounding of lighting and colour, and in the disruption of syntax reinforcing the emotive power of the scene, which opens as follows:

²⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises*, p. 39.

²⁹ This is in fact the second chapter of the novel. In Part 1, the autobiographical chapters (one of which opens the book), are titled, while the historical chapters (of which this is the first) are numbered. This feature is reversed in Part 2.

³⁰ David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 83.

Aube de ce 13 juin 1830, à l'instant précis et bref où le jour éclate au-dessus de la conque profonde. Il est cinq heures du matin. Devant l'imposante flotte qui déchire l'horizon, la Ville Imprenable se dévoile, blancheur fantomatique, à travers un poudrolement de bleus et de gris mêlés. Triangle incliné dans le lointain et qui, après le scintillement de la dernière brume nocturne, se fixe adouci, tel un corps à l'abandon, sur un tapis de verdure assombrie. La montagne paraît barrière esquissée dans un azur d'aquarelle. (p. 18)

The wide-angle opening shot reveals the oncoming armada, as Algiers, "la Ville Imprenable", the ungraspable object of desire, comes into view. This first glimpse, viewed from the enemy angle, "triangle incliné dans le lointain", highlights the sexual tension of the scene where "le corps à l'abandon" awaits its fate. The blurred opaques and gentle pastels give the scene a sense of eerie calm, as the colours detach themselves from their objects, producing an impressionist haze. The "blancheur fantomatique" of "la ville" carries with it a hint of the mystery (reinforced by the image of the town shedding its veils), but also associations of purity and innocence. The muted colours, "un tapis de verdure assombrie ... couleurs délicates", which suggest the vulnerability of "l'Alger/ie-femme", are contrasted with the startling natural beauty of the setting, "le scintillement de la dernière brume nocturne ... La montagne paraît barrière esquissée dans un azur d'aquarelle." (p. 18)

"Premier face à face" (p. 18). The camera pans slowly from a long shot of the object of desire to the desiring subject: "La ville, paysage tout dentelures et couleurs délicates, surgit dans un rôle d'Orientale immobilisée en son mystère. L'Armada française va lentement glisser devant elle en un ballet fastueux, de la première heure de l'aurore aux alentours d'un midi éclaboussé" (p. 18). The stillness of the scene is reinforced by the characterisation of the object of desire as "l'Orientale immobilisée" and by the slow parading of the subject of desire, captivated by the myth of orientalism.

Immobility and silence are further emphasised by the verbless sentence where activity, like the missing verb, is suspended in space: "Silence de l'affrontement, instant solennel, suspendu en une apnée d'attente, comme avant une ouverture d'opéra". After the silence and suspense - the illusion of reality is suddenly broken - "Qui dès lors constitue le spectacle, de quel côté se trouve vraiment le public?" (p. 18). This defamiliarising question shatters the illusion - this is not simply a visual

reconstruction, a scene from a film, but a show, a performance in which the relationship between actors and audience is called into question. As Djebbar prefigures the active, returning gaze of the native/native land, the challenge is not just to look, to take in the scene, but to see who is looking and to follow that gaze.

The first human figure comes into view: “L’homme qui regarde s’appelle Amable Matterer. Il regarde et écrit, le jour même: ‘J’ai été le premier à voir la ville d’Alger comme un petit triangle blanc couché sur le penchant d’une montagne’” (p. 18). In Djebbar’s world, where “l’amour s’écrit”, the act of writing, in the absence of the act of love, becomes an act of possession (p. 13).

A sense of activity and sound is suddenly introduced: “Par milliers, les corps des matelots et des soldats se relèvent sur les ponts, remontent des soutes par grappes cliquetantes, s’agglutinent sur les gaillards” (p. 19). Then the scene is suddenly blanketed in ominous silence, like a deafening sound-track which is abruptly cut, leaving only an image of striking light: “Silence étalé d’un coup en un drap immense réverbéré, comme si la soie de lumière déjà intense, prodiguée en flaque étincelantes, allait crisser” (p. 19).

The camera moves in then freezes on a still of the city: “La ville barbaresque ne bouge pas. Rien n’y frémit, ni ne vient altérer l’éclat laiteux de ses maisons étagées que l’on distingue peu à peu: pan oblique de la montagne dont la masse se détache nettement, en une suite de croupes molles, d’un vert éclairci” (p. 19). The city, “l’Alger/ie-femme” silently resists its assailant. The negatives foreground her stubbornness, pride and impenetrability, while the gentle, opaque colours highlight her innocence and desirability.

The scene is now set for “the look” and its “returning gaze”: “Dans le désordre des hamacs suspendus en vrac, entre les pièces d’artillerie et les batteries sur le qui-vive, telles des bêtes de cirque prêtes à la cérémonie derrière un halo de projecteurs, la foule des futurs envahisseurs regarde” (p. 19). The delay of the verb ascribes significance to the act of looking and prepares for the returning gaze:

Amable Matterer, capitaine en second du *Ville de Marseille*, et ses compagnons demeurent immobiles. La Ville Imprenable leur fait *front de ses*

multiples yeux invisibles. D'où cet excès même dans la blancheur de la cité, comme si le panorama aux formes pourtant attendues - ici une coupole de mosquée reflétée dans l'eau, là-haut quelque ciselure de donjon ou une pointe de minaret - se figeait dans une proximité troublante. (p. 19) [My emphasis]

A dynamic is reinscribed into the relationship between "la France" and l'Alger/ie-femme", symbol of the woman who will not be possessed, who will not be penetrated, a woman who, although suffused in the myth of Orientalism, silently resists that myth with her stubborn gaze: "Des milliers de spectateurs, là-bas, dénombrent sans doute les vaisseaux" (p. 19). The equation "les Français/spectateurs, les Algériens/spectacle" is now reversed. The eye of the beholder is now the Algerian eye who possesses the French army in its gaze. The tension implied in their "proximité troublante" captures the heightening of desire as the desiring subject approaches its object.

Here again Djébar defamiliarises by a series of questions interrupting the stillness and the sequence of events: "Qui le dira, qui l'écrit? Quel rescapé, et seulement après la conclusion de cette rencontre? Parmi la première escadre qui glisse insensiblement vers l'ouest, Amable Matterer regarde la ville qui regarde. Le jour même, il décrit cette confrontation, dans la plate sobriété du compte rendu" (p. 19).

The confrontation is not only between "la France" and "l'Algérie" but between Matterer's objective, dispassionate, detached prose and the subjective, impassioned, colourful writing by which Djébar inscribes herself into the telling of history:

A mon tour, j'écris dans sa langue, mais plus de cent cinquante ans après En cette aurore de la double découverte, que se disent les femmes de la ville, quels rêves d'amour s'allument en elles, où s'éteignent à jamais, tandis qu'elles contemplent la flotte royale qui dessine les figures d'une chorégraphie mystérieuse? Je rêve à cette brève trêve de tous les commencements; je m'insinue, visiteuse importune, dans le vestibule de ce proche passé, enlevant mes sandales selon le rite habituel, suspendant mon souffle pour tenter de tout réentendre... (p. 20)

The object of desire is transformed into the subject of desire as "les femmes" look back at "la flotte française" and as Djébar writes back or over the plain prose of Matterer. The outburst of poetic prose challenges Matterer's detached account. The

highlighting of sound-patterning in the sustained use of alliteration and assonance (the repeated vowel sounds of “rêve”, “brève”, “trêve”, giving way to the “v” in “visiteuse”. “vestibule”, the “p” in “proche passé”, the “s” in “sandales selon” etc.) represents an interference of semiotic language. This irruption of the semiotic points to Djébar’s desire for unity with “l’Algérie-femme”, with the lost mother-land, a desire she hopes to fulfil by visiting Algeria’s past and reinscribing herself into its history.

So although Djébar places her reconstruction of the dawn of colonisation within the boundaries of symbolic/historic time, her revision of the event manifests an *anti-symbolic* stance, culminating in Djébar’s subjective invasion of the text. However, her reversal of the “gaze”, allowing “L’Algérie-femme” to look back into the eyes of the oppressor, is reminiscent of the *symbolic* tendency of phase 1 of Kristeva’s model, as it marks a desire to be acknowledged by “La France”, betraying a sense of subjectivity gained not through the self, but via the other.

Extermination - Part 2: “Femmes, Enfants, Boeufs couchés dans la grotte”³¹

The historical reconstructions provide detailed accounts of the various stages of France’s territorial advances, and are heavily dependent on information from, and insertions of, colonialist intertexts. Does Djébar’s dependence on these texts mimic the colonised/coloniser paradigm (in a variation of Phase 1 of Kristeva’s model, where the early feminist movement is seen as replicating female/male dependence), or does Djébar manage to manipulate these texts in such a way as to subvert the relationship of dependence?

The passage in question deals with the ruthless fumigations of the rebel tribes of Ouled Riah in the caves of Nacmaria, in 1845. Before looking at this passage, I would like to examine the characteristics of different types of “colonialist” writings, using the distinctions drawn by JanMohamed in “The Economy of the Manichean Allegory”. JanMohamed divides colonialist literature into two broad categories, the ‘imaginary’, and the ‘symbolic’, drawing on Lacanian interpretation of the terms:

³¹ Third chapter of Part 2, pp. 81-97.

The emotive as well as the cognitive intentionalities of the 'imaginary' text are structured by objectification and aggression. ... The 'imaginary' representation of indigenous people tends to coalesce the signifier with the signified. In describing the attributes or actions of the native, issues such as intention, causality, extenuating circumstances, and so forth, are completely ignored; in the 'imaginary' colonialist realm, to say 'native' is automatically to say 'evil', and to evoke immediately the economy of the manichean allegory. The writer of such texts tends to fetishize a nondialectical, fixed opposition between the self and the native.³²

Writers of 'symbolic' texts, "grounded more firmly and securely in the egalitarian imperatives of Western societies", tend to be more open to "a modifying dialectic of self and Other".³³ Symbolic texts are subdivided into two types. The first type, 'syncretic texts', attempt to find syncretic solutions to the manichean opposition of coloniser and colonised, but ironically these texts are often "seduced by the specularity of 'imaginary' Otherness" and "better illustrate the economy and power of the manichean allegory than the strictly 'imaginary' texts".³⁴ The second type of 'symbolic' text (no generic term given) realises that syncretism is impossible and, by examining the 'imaginary' mechanism of colonialist mentality, manages to free itself from the manichean allegory.

A close examination of this chapter (which is divided into two main sections with a short linking passage) reveals the way that Djebbar manipulates the intertexts. In the first section, the events of the days and months leading up to the tragedy are recounted, as the French army subdue the local tribes and the Ouled Riah tribe takes refuge in the caves of Nacmaria. Negotiations with the tribe's emissaries eventually break down and the French take their revenge: the exits of the caves are blocked, the piles of brushwood prepared outside are set on fire, and the cave is lit up with flames which rise two hundred feet high. Djebbar repeatedly builds up the story, but then stops short of disclosing its dramatic finale, a refusal which mimics the tension and frustration of the situation itself. This section ends with Djebbar fast-forwarding to the morning after the tragedy, while maintaining a total silence over the full horror of

³² Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of the Manichean Allegory", (1985), in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 18-28, p. 19.

³³ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

the night before. It is not until the second half of the chapter that Djébar finally discloses the full truth.

Although the text starts off by adhering to strict chronological linearity, as the chapter proceeds, the reconstruction of the story becomes increasingly fragmented, taking on a cumulative structure, which subverts the progressive, linear style of traditional historical narrative. The chapter is constructed like a jigsaw puzzle, put together using a whole plethora of fragments taken from historical archives and painstakingly pieced together. However, Djébar carefully selects her fragments to present two alternative versions of the same story, and the division within the chapter is revealed to be the dividing line between the two alternative jigsaw puzzle pictures which she creates, each of which reveals a completely different picture of the past.

The first section (or jigsaw puzzle) presents the story of the caves strictly from the point of view of the coloniser, and uses excerpts and information from eye-witnesses with “imaginary” tendencies (Bugeaud who ordered the fumigations, and Pélissier who carried out his orders) and as a result constructs an “imaginary” puzzle. But this puzzle is never completed; every time Djébar comes close to setting down the last piece, she deliberately withdraws, unable to reveal “le secret violent des pierres” (p. 89). It is as if an “imaginary” picture is by its very nature unable to reveal the whole truth.

Initially then the various stages of the altercations are presented in strict chronological order: “En mai”, “Le mois de juin”, “Le 11 juin” etc. (p. 82). The content is factual, the tone detached, the sequence of events carefully reproduced:

Les quatre premiers jours, Pélissier s'attaque aux tribus de Beni Zeroual et des Ouled Kelouf dont il obtient, après quelques combats, la soumission Le 16 juin, Pélissier place son camp au lieu-dit 'Ouled el Amria', sur le territoire d'un des adjoints du Chérif A l'aube du 18 juin Pélissier est décidé à trancher ...” (p. 83).

As the moment of climax approaches and negotiations drag on unsuccessfully, the text starts to fragment more and more, as various incidents related to the build-up of the tragedy are recounted, one after the other, but with no narrative links drawing them together. The impression of fragmentation is exacerbated by the distortion of

the passage of time, at times winding on too slowly, stretching several hours over several pages and at other times abruptly changing pace, fast-forwarding, racing through the days and months.

In a sense both the fragmented nature of the text and its irregular rhythm could be seen as being dependent on the colonial father or master texts, which literally inform the story and whose rhythms impose themselves on the story. Each historical fragment drawn upon becomes a piece of the jigsaw puzzle, imprinting or leaving a trace of its particular style, emphasis and rhythm. Yet it is Djébar who creates the puzzle, manipulating the pieces at will in order to serve her own ends. If Djébar chooses to emphasise rather than disguise the fragmentation, it is to draw attention to the mechanics of recovering history, and to the possibility of putting together an alternative picture of the past.

The “imaginary” nature of this first puzzle is highlighted by direct insertions of Bugeaud’s unashamedly narcissistic writings, best illustrated by his original instructions to Pélissier: “Si ces gredins se retirent dans leurs grottes, ordonne Bugeaud, imitez Cavaignac aux Sbéah, enfumez-les à outrance, comme des renards” (p. 82). This de-humanising reference to the tribes of Dahra demonstrates what JanMohamed describes as the “fetishization” of the native:

The power of the ‘imaginary’ field binding the narcissistic colonialist text is nowhere better illustrated than in its fetishization of the Other. This process operates by substituting natural or generic categories for those that are socially or ideologically determined. All the evil characteristics and habits with which the colonialist endows the native are thereby not presented as the products of social and cultural difference, but as characteristics inherent in the race – in the ‘blood’ – of the native.”³⁵

According to JanMohamed, this fetishizing strategy permits not only an exchange of denigrating images which can be used to maintain a sense of moral difference/superiority, but also allow the writer to transform social and historical dissimilarities into universal, metaphysical differences. If, as Pélissier has done, Algerian men, women, and children can be collapsed into beings from the animal

³⁵ Ibid. , p 20-21.

world in an expression of metonymic displacement, then, in JanMohamed's words, "... clearly there can be no meeting-ground, no identity, between the social, historical creatures of Europe and the metaphysical alterity of the Calibans and Ariels of Africa." ³⁶

In the second section, Djébar creates another and very different jigsaw picture - one which tells the same story, but which uses different pieces. This second jigsaw again incorporates the words of *others*, but this time draws on the words of Europeans whose reports of events transcended the "imaginary" blindness of Bugeaud, and achieved a 'symbolic' dimension, revealing a frame of mind "more open to a modifying dialectic of self and Other." ³⁷

At this stage, Djébar also inserts herself directly into the narration: "Je reconstitue, à mon tour, cette nuit" (p. 88) in order to retell the story, now her story, from the perspective of the colonialist's "Other". The jigsaw-picture now becomes three-dimensional as the people of Nacmaria appear graphically in the full horror of their asphyxiated bodies. The narrative becomes even more fragmented as not only the speed of the text but also its progression are distorted, as Djébar constantly rewinds and fast-forwards, engaging the reader's sympathy by following a cumulative rather than linear path. This technique of persuasion by "creating presence" through repetition rather than by logical, linear argumentation, can be seen as semiotic, not only because it mimics the endlessly repetitive pulsations of the chora, but also because it mimics the rhetorical style of the maternal language, Arabic .

As Djébar rewinds to the fateful night of the tragedy, she abandons the constraints of historical evidence and allows her imagination to take over: "J'imagine les détails du tableau nocturne" (p. 88), before finally bringing herself to spell out the extent of the horror: "la tribu des Ouled Riah - mille cinq cents hommes, femmes, enfants, vieillards, plus les troupeaux par centaines et les chevaux - a été tout entière anéantie par 'enfumade' ". We now relive the full horror of the tragedy with the help of two eye-witnesses, one French, the other Spanish, both of whom entered the caves on the

³⁶ Ibid. , p. 22.

³⁷ Ibid. , p. 19.

21st, the day after the tragedy occurred, and recounted the tragedy in all its graphic symbolic reality:

J'ai vu un homme mort, le genou à terre, la main crispée sur la corne d'un boeuf. Devant lui était une femme tenant son enfant dans ses bras. Cet homme, il était facile de le reconnaître, avait été asphyxié, ainsi que la femme, l'enfant et le boeuf, au moment où il cherchait à préserver sa famille de la rage de cet animal. (pp. 90-91)

Despite the extent of the horror, Djebbar maintains a restrained tone until the thought of Pélissier's final order provokes a bitter outburst of anger in a sudden loss of "sang-froid" which she projects onto Pélissier:

Cet après-midi du 21 juin 1845, les fumées se dissipent autour du promontoire. Je m'attarde, moi, sur l'ordre de Pélissier:

- Sortez-les au soleil! Comptez-les!

- Peut-être, *perdant son contrôle*, aurait-il pu ajouter avec la brusquerie de l'acharnement:

"Sortons ces sauvages, même raidis ou en putréfaction, et nous aurons alors gagné, nous serons parvenus au bout!".... Je ne sais, je conjecture sur les termes des directives: la fiction, ma fiction, serait-ce d'imaginer si vainement la motivation des bourreaux? (p. 91) [My emphasis]

The use of topicalisation combined with the omission of the main verb is a sentence structure which Djebbar uses at moments of high tension, where grammatical conventions and symbolic detachment are abandoned. Here it is used to foreground the tragedy of her people's suffering, exposed by the 'symbolic' realism of Pélissier and others: "Asphyxiés du Dahra que les mots exposent, que la mémoire déterre. L'écriture du rapport de Pélissier, du témoignage dénonciateur de l'officier espagnol, de la lettre de l'anonyme troublé, cette écriture est devenu graphie de fer et d'acier contre les falaises de Nacmaria." (p. 93).

Despite Pélissier's "imaginary" detachment, the consequences of his actions have filled him with feelings of remorse detectable in his official report of events. This report displays what JanMohamed refers to as 'symbolic tendencies', betraying a sudden chasm in the manichean opposition of coloniser and colonised, and revealing an awareness of the Other to which Djebbar gives grudging gratitude:

J'oserais presque le remercier d'avoir fait face aux cadavres, d'avoir cédé au désir de les immortaliser, dans les figures de leurs corps raidis, de leurs

étreintes paralysées, de leur ultime contorsion. D'avoir regardé l'ennemi autrement qu'en multitude fanatisée, en armée d'ombres omniprésentes. (p. 96)

It is this crack in Pélissier's "imaginary" perception of the native which allows symbolic reality to filter through, this opening up of a dialectic of self and other which permits a bridge to be built between Djébar's words and those of Pélissier: "Oui, une pulsion me secoue, telle une sourde otalgie: remercier Pélissier pour son rapport qui déclencha à Paris une tempête politique, mais aussi qui me renvoie nos morts vers lesquels j'élève aujourd'hui ma trame de mots français." (p. 96).

In a final lyrical outburst, Djébar allows "la passion calcinée des ancêtres" (p. 97) to invest her writing both literally, in the emotions it inspires, and metaphorically, as the charred bodies are inscribed onto the landscape: "Le paysage tout entier, les montagnes du Dahra, les falaises crayeuses, les vallonnements aux vergers brûlés s'inversent pour se recomposer dans les antres funèbres. Les victimes pétrifiées deviennent à leur tour montagnes et vallées. Les femmes couchées au milieu des bêtes, dans des étreintes lyriques, révèlent leur aspiration à être les soeurs-épouses de leurs hommes qui ne se rendent pas" (p. 97).

The second half of this chapter is semiotic in the sense that it demonstrates a strong sense of identification with the maternal, in this case the "Mother-land", as Djébar gradually abandons the objective tones of historical reporting and passionately relives the suffering of her people. Moreover, her manipulation of the colonialists' texts lays bare their "imaginary" perceptions of the "native", freeing not their texts, but her own from the "economy of manichean dependence."

The symbolic mode - autobiographical sections - Parts 1 and 2

In Parts 1 and 2 of *L'Amour, la fantasia*, the historical sections alternate with the autobiographical ones, as Djébar's double quest attempts to recreate a new sense of national and personal identity. The Algerian people's experience of colonial law, and their subsequent loss of *national identity* can be paralleled with their experience of another law, the law of Oumma, or "religious community/nationhood", which dominates the personal, social and the political aspects of life in the Maghreb, and

which causes the suppression of *personal identity*, which by extension has resulted in the suppression of “le moi autobiographique”:

La modernité, c'est d'abord l'individu et cette notion est totalement étrangère aux sociétés traditionnelles Dans la société traditionnelle [du Maghreb], l'individu n'est perçu que comme ‘Partie intégrante du Tout, de cette *Oumma*, patrie qui l'englobe et le désire au point de viser à lui faire oublier sa dimension de sujet désirant’ Celui qui se singularise paraît oublier le ‘nous’ et donner l'impression de se séparer du groupe, en [sic] encore de la *Oumma*, la mère islamique; il sort de la fusion maternelle; là où se trouve le salut collectif et individuel, dans une chaude singularité.³⁸

Not only is the “je” considered to be a threat to the “nous”, but it reverberates with associations of betrayal, of collaboration with the Other:

L'exil, la sortie, la séparation d'avec ‘les frères’ c'est le départ vers les ténèbres, la perte ... vers l'Occident (la *ghurba*, la division et la séparation ne peuvent être que l'oeuvre de Satan le diviseur ou que l'oeuvre de l'étranger (avec son ‘agression culturelle’) cherchant toujours à diviser. L'émergence du ‘je’ est somme toute une *fitna*, une épreuve: dissension dans le tissu unitaire de l'identité nationale, surtout autrefois durant le temps de la colonisation et du combat contre celle-ci.”³⁹

The power of the law of “*Oumma*” over the individual consciousness is revealed in the traditional formulation: “Il est bien connu qu'au Maghreb on a une ‘phobie tenace de la solitude, de la singularité. ‘Que Dieu me protège du mot ‘je!’’ s'exclame l'individu que la teneur de sa conversation oblige à faire une entorse au pluriel de rigueur pour parler de lui-même à la première personne du singulier.”⁴⁰ Djébar recognises in herself this resistance to “le moi autobiographique”: “J'essaie de comprendre pourquoi je résiste à cette poussée de l'autobiographie. Je résiste peut-être parce que mon éducation de femme arabe est de ne jamais parler de soi, en même temps aussi parce que je parlais en langue française.”⁴¹

³⁸ Jean Déjeux, *La littérature féminine de langue française au Maghreb* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 65, 66.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 64. Déjeux here quotes Slimane Zeghidour, *Le Voile et la bannière* (Paris: Hachette, 1990), p. 15.

⁴¹ Quotation of Djébar's taken from Mildred Mortimer, “Entretien avec Assia Djébar, écrivain algérien.”, p. 203.

Kristeva's notion of "le thétique" can be applied to Djébar's resistance to autobiography. What Djébar refers to as "parler de soi" is not only a transgression of the law of "Oumma", but also a dangerous opening up of the self to the past, with the potential of causing semiotic disruption to the symbolic ordering of her life - a sort of thetic rupture in reverse - not going forth from infancy into the social world, but a voyage back into the past which threatens to rupture the thetic barriers holding back the semiotic spaces of her mind.

The notion of "entry into language" as representing the key to the identity of the social being is complicated by the fact that Djébar "parlait en langue française". Djébar's entry into the French language causes a split, a rupture, a thetic crisis creating in her a second and conflicting sense of self. It launches her into a new social order, which is also founded on rupture and repression, on the splitting of the subject into Algerian and French "selves", leading to the repression of her Arab identity and language.

Djébar's split sense of identity brought about by her entry into the French language is, in Lacanian terms, also based on lack, on the loss of the maternal, in this case the maternal language. Her subsequent loss of Arab identity is displaced not into a chain of social meanings, but into a chain of social/historical memories in an impossible attempt to recover maternal plenitude.

Murdoch sees Djébar's constant alternation between the presentation of the events of the 1830 invasion and the presence of writing as autobiography as structurally reflecting the ambiguity with which colonisation is inscribed upon the colonial subject "as it alternates between the erasure of its own culture, and the desire to assume that of the Other..."⁴² Djébar's autobiographical sections are interpreted in terms of "the female subject awakening to desire [as she] seeks to chronicle the constitution of her own subjectivity in the face of patriarchal domination", and the main issues to which the text addresses itself as "desire and the subversion of patriarchy"⁴³

⁴² H. Adlai Murdoch, "Rewriting Writing: Identity, Exile and Renewal in Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*", *Yale French Studies*, 2: 83, pp. 71-92, p. 76.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 78.

However, what Djebbar describes as her “*own* kind of feminism” appears to express a more ambiguous relation to the rule of the “patriarch”, for some fathers, if not all fathers, are upholders of women:

Donc le féminisme, chez nous, enfin l'émancipation des femmes, est passé par l'intercession des pères. Rappelez-vous simplement qu'en 52, le roi du Maroc, Mohamed V, qui était extraordinairement populaire et qui était considéré comme le descendant du Prophète, avait demandé à sa fille aînée, Lalla Aïcha, de se dévoiler publiquement. Cette ‘libération’, si on peut dire, du corps pour les filles se faisait avec l’assentiment du père. J’ai voulu évoquer cela. C’est ce qui m’amène à commencer ma propre histoire ‘main dans la main’ avec le père.”⁴⁴

This openness to dual maternal/paternal identification can be interpreted in the light of Virginia Woolf’s embracing of androgyny. Woolf sees woman as privileged, or forced, to attain an androgynous position because she is situated at once outside and inside the dominant order: “Woolf, too, talks of the split in the woman’s consciousness, which can ‘think back through its fathers or through its mothers’ ”.⁴⁵ In *L’Amour, la fantasia* Djebbar can be seen, in the words of Woolf, to be *thinking back through her fathers and her mothers*. In the autobiographical sections of the work, Djebbar is thinking back through her father, tracing her establishment in the paternal/social order into which she is propelled via her entry into the paternal language. French is the paternal language not only because it is associated with the colonial fathers, or her biological father (who initiated her into the French language), but also because it places her in a privileged position with relation to the world of men.

According to Kristeva, the little girl faces a stark choice in her psycho-sexual development⁴⁶: “La fille, aussi, se trouve devant un choix: soit elle s’identifie à la mère, soit elle s’élève à la hauteur symbolique du père.”⁴⁷ In the first case she achieves fulfillment “les phases pré-oedipiennes (l’érotisme oral et anal) s’en

⁴⁴ Lise Gauvin, “Assia Djebbar, Territoires des langues: entretien”, *Littérature - L’Ecrivain et ses langues* 101, p.81.

⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Hogarth, 1967), p.146. Quoted in Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the problem of the subject*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Kristeva’s theory is put forward in relation to monotheistic societies, albeit Western ones.

⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises*, p. 33. My emphasis.

trouvent intensifiées” and, as a heterosexual woman, attains “la jouissance vaginale”.⁴⁸ In the second case, the daughter gains access to the symbolic at the expense of the pre-Oedipal phase and the vagina, “effaç[ant] les traces de la dépendance vis-à-vis du corps de la mère”, obliterating the traces of the maternal.⁴⁹ Djébar has entered into the French language by the intervention of the father but this entry into the paternal, symbolic order comes at the price Kristeva cites - her loss of identification with the maternal order.

The historical sections which describe the entry of “L’Algérie femme” into the paternalistic, colonial order are paralleled by the autobiographical sections which focus on Djébar’s entry into the paternal order of language. In both cases, Djébar is “thinking back through her fathers” - her biological father, the Father-land (France), and using the paternal language (French). But just as Djébar’s look back into the history of Algeria via the paternalistic intertexts reveals semiotic desire - in her passionate identification with the Mother-land - so Djébar’s look back into her own history via the paternal language reveals semiotic presence-as-absence, in the underlying loss of mother-identification. This “thinking back through her fathers” therefore reveals a maternal or semiotic void, which Djébar will consciously try to fill in Part 3.

Looking back through the father figure

The opening chapter of *L’Amour, la fantasia* weaves together the conflicts of a young girl at the boundaries of two worlds, maternal and paternal, of two languages, French and Arabic, and of two eras, past and present, held together precariously by the act of writing in the language of the oppressor.

“Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l’école un matin d’automne, main dans la main du père” (p. 15). This simple, vivid and touching image opens the book on a note of closeness and identification with the father figure: “Celui-ci, un fez sur la tête, la silhouette haute et droite dans son costume européen, porte un cartable, il est

⁴⁸ Ibid. , p. 33.

⁴⁹ Ibid. , p. 33.

instituteur à l'école française. Fillette arabe dans un village du Sahel algérien" (p. 15).

The note of simplicity is maintained in the description of the father from a child's perspective, "la silhouette haute et droite", distinguished by the features a child might point out, "un fez", "un cartable". But the simplicity is deceptive: there is already a note of ambiguity, the markers of a life lived between two worlds. Despite the fez, the dress is Western - "son costume européen", despite being "une fillette arabe", her father is a teacher at "l'école française."

For Djébar, the entry into the French language brings about a thetic crisis by which she is transposed into a man's world - the paternal order. Pinkney describes the difficulties women face within that order, and relates these difficulties to the necessary and yet problematic nature of paternal-identification, which induces a state of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion:

Even if she identifies herself with the mother, in the position of the repressed and marginal, she must have a certain identification with the father in order to sustain a place in the symbolic order and avoid psychosis. On the other hand, if she identifies herself with the father, denying the woman in herself, she is none the less biologically female: the father-identification remains precarious, stands always in need of defence.⁵⁰

Djébar's paternal-identification places her both inside and outside the dominant male order, but also, and more poignantly, places her both inside and outside the maternal order which perceives her "annexation" of the outside world, the male/public world, as a threat:

Dès le premier jour où une fillette sort pour apprendre l'alphabet, les voisins prennent le regard matois de ceux qui s'apitoient, dix, quinze ans à l'avance: sur le père audacieux, sur le frère inconséquent. Le malheur fondra inmanquablement sur eux. Toute vierge savante saura écrire, écrira à coup sûr "la lettre". Viendra l'heure où l'amour qui s'écrit est plus dangereux que l'amour séquestré. (p. 15).

⁵⁰ Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the problem of the subject*, p. 22.

The threat to the *paternal* order is represented by desire: "The eruption of desire threatens the 'forging of links and chains' of the symbolic, and must be checked."⁵¹ "L'amour qui s'écrit" is a love that is all the more threatening in that it can literally and metaphorically escape the control of the paternal order.

Desire must be more than kept in check; it must be imprisoned: "Le geôlier d'un corps sans mots - et les mots écrits sont mobiles - peut finir, lui, par dormir tranquille: il lui suffira de supprimer les fenêtres, de cadenasser l'unique portail, d'élever jusqu'au ciel un mur orbe" (p. 15). Only the written word can fly through the bars and escape paternal censure, as desire relentlessly pursues its object: "Si la jeune fille écrit? Sa voix, en dépit du silence, circule. Un papier. Un chiffon froissé. Une main de servante, dans le noir. Un enfant au secret. Le gardien devra veiller jour et nuit. L'écrit s'envolera par le patio, sera lancé d'une terrasse. Azur soudain trop vaste. Tout est à recommencer" (pp. 16-17)

Djebar's third person references to herself give way to the first person in an assertion of subjectivity which marks the first direct challenge to patriarchy: "A dix-sept ans, j'entre dans l'histoire d'amour à cause d'une lettre. Un inconnu m'a écrit; par inconscience ou par audace il l'a fait ouvertement. Le père, secoué d'une rage sans éclats, a déchiré devant moi la missive. Il ne me la donne pas à lire; il la jette au panier" (p. 16).

This surge of desire comes at the cost of alienation from the father, a distance underlined by the omission of the possessive pronoun ("le père"). Ironically, by initiating her into the French language, the patriarch has given her the key to her own liberation, and made possible the escape from paternal law into the uncharted waters of desire. Defiance to this paternal law brings liberation, then love: "A l'instar d'une héroïne d'un roman occidental, le défi juvénile m'a libérée du cercle que des chuchotements d'aïeules invisibles ont tracé autour de moi et en moi Puis l'amour conjugal s'est transmué dans le tunnel du plaisir, argile conjugale" (p. 16).

There is a sudden semiotic irruption in the narrative, as if the efflorescence of pleasure overcomes symbolic restraint.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.141.

Lustration des sons d'enfance dans le souvenir; elle nous enveloppe jusqu'à la découverte de la sensualité dont la submersion peu à peu nous éblouit ... Silencieuse, coupée des mots de ma mère par une mutilation de la mémoire, j'ai parcouru les eaux sombres du corridor en miraculée, sans en deviner les murailles. Choc des premiers mots révélés: la vérité a surgi d'une fracture de ma parole balbutiante. De quelle roche nocturne du plaisir suis-je parvenue à l'arracher? (p. 16-17).

"Lustration des sons ... elle nous enveloppe": the repeated subject, in the form of a referencing pronoun, marks the entry into lyrical language. The materiality of sounds, the soft "s" sounds, of "sons", "sensualité", "submersion", "silencieuse", the alliteration in the phrase "coupée des mots de ma mère par une mutilation de la mémoire" subdues what Pinkney terms the "ideality of meaning" in a sensuous play of signifiers. But Pinkney also points to the dangers for women of such semiotic escapism: "...the rush of these nonsensical, periphrastic, maternal rhythms in her speech, far from soothing her, far from making her laugh, destroys the symbolic armour: makes her ecstatic, nostalgic or mad..."⁵²

Here there is nostalgia for "les sons de l'enfance", for the infant's intimacy with the maternal, as Djébar finds herself split in half, cut off from her mother-tongue: "coupée des mots de ma mère". Here too is a kind of madness - the imprisonment of consciousness in the dark recesses of "les eaux sombres" but from which pleasure - the long lost words of the body, "le parler-corps", and the long-lost sensuousness of the mother-child bond, is finally recovered.

"J'ai fait éclater l'espace en moi, un espace éperdu de cris sans voix, figés depuis longtemps dans une préhistoire de l'amour." As Djébar re-enters into the semiotic recesses of her mind, she accesses the repressed sounds of the maternal order, not only the lost voice of the Mother, but also the repressed voices of other women whose cries have been stifled for generations.

This semiotic outburst is cut short by a thetic "rappel à l'ordre": "Les mots une fois éclairés - ceux-là mêmes, que le corps dévoilé découvre -, j'ai coupé les amarres. Ma fillette me tenant la main, je suis partie à l'aube" (p. 17). In a final sentence

⁵² Ibid. , pp. 49, 22.

which both echoes and subverts the opening sentence, Djébar lets go of her father's hand, and metaphorically takes hold of the hand of her childhood self, in a gesture which marks both a distancing from the father, and a clear sense of direction in her writing, as she marches back into "les eaux sombres" of Algerian history: "je suis partie à l'aube" (p. 17). For the dawn of her story becomes the dawn of Algeria's downfall - "Aube de ce 13 juin 1830" - (p. 18), as she inextricably links her history with that of "L'Algérie-femme".

Looking back at the paternal language

The site of language is the battleground between Djébar's maternal/paternal identification. While initiating her into the paternal order, the paternal language cuts her off from the language of the maternal. This linguistic rupture instigates a sense of emotional loss, a lack-in-language which is identified with a specific moment in Djébar's life recalled in "La Fille du Gendarme Français" (pp. 34-42). Here again there is a "thetic" crisis in reverse, not a rupture of semiotic harmony, but a sudden consciousness of maternal lack, a recognition of the cost of her entry into the language and world of men.

In this chapter Djébar describes the passionate relationship between Marie-Louise, "la fille du gendarme français", and her new fiancé, Paul, played out before the young Djébar and her companions. The amorous behaviour of "la fille du gendarme", who unselfconsciously boasts of her love for Paul, referring to him as "Pilou chéri", causes a mixture of shocked disapproval and childish hilarity in her audience of "filles déjà puritaines" (p. 42):

"Pilou", c'était Paul et le "chéri" qu'elle ajoutait devait être un vocable réservé, pensions-nous, aux alcôves et aux secrets des couples "Pilou chéri", mots suivis de touffes de rires sarcastiques; que dire de la destruction que cette appellation opéra en moi par la suite? Je crus ressentir d'emblée, très tôt, trop tôt, que l'amourette, que l'amour ne doivent pas, par des mots de clinquant, par une tendresse voyante de ferblanterie, donner prise au spectacle, susciter l'envie de celles qui en seront frustrées.... Je décidai que l'amour résidait nécessairement ailleurs, au-delà des mots et des gestes publics. (pp. 41-42)

This love expressed in the paternal language, is exposed as sham, as show, “une tendresse voyante de ferblanterie, un spectacle”. The object of its desire is not “Pilou chéri” but the recognition of its audience (“susciter l’envie”). Reverberating into Djebbar’s adult consciousness, the words “Pilou chéri” mark the emotional sterility of the French language. And, because the order of language constructs identity, the emotional sterility at the level of language is projected onto a damaged sense of self:

Anodine scène d’enfance: une aridité de l’expression s’installe et la sensibilité dans sa période romantique se retrouve *aphasique*. Malgré le bouillonnement de mes rêves d’adolescence plus tard, un noeud, à cause de ce ‘Pilou chéri’, résista: la langue française pouvait tout m’offrir de ses trésors inépuisables, mais pas un, pas le moindre de ses mots d’amour ne me serait réservé Un jour ou l’autre, parce que cet état *autistique* ferait chape à mes élans de femme, surviendrait à rebours quelque soudaine explosion. (p. 42) [My emphasis]

According to Kristeva, the price of father-identification is high and results in emotional/sexual ambiguity: “... la fille refoule le stade oral-sadique, en même temps qu’elle refoule le vagin et la possibilité de trouver un partenaire allogène...”⁵³ Similarly, the price of Djebbar’s entry into the paternal language is high. The terms which describe it, “aphasia” and “autism”, also speak of deep-seated psychological trauma. Her aphasia (loss of speech caused here by emotional rather than cerebral damage) creates “une aridité de l’expression”; her autism (withdrawal, not from the world of reality, but from the world of affective relationships) stifles her spontaneous impulses and creates a pressure-house of repressed emotions.

The rejection of the image of love associated with “Pilou chéri” is projected onto a repression of romantic love in adolescence. The words mark a process of condensation, whereby the image of the flirtatious Marie-Louise and the sound of the words imprinted on the unconscious of her mind create “un noeud”, a nodal point, an intersection for a whole cluster of associated feelings, repressed memories and desires, which threaten to surface explosively.

The latent explosion of her inner being is linked to another explosion, “Explosion du Fort l’Empereur” (p. 43), marking the French army’s entry into Algiers. There are

parallels between Marie-Louise's joy, "son éclat de bonheur", and the joy of the triumphant French army as it takes possession of the significant stronghold. Both explosions are associated with tragedy for the Arab side - tragedy for the Arab camp, now headed for defeat, and tragedy for a young Arab girl, now scarred by emotional lack.

Challenging paternal authority

Part 2 (historical) of *L'Amour, la fantasia* is characterised by the heightening of violence and desire in the relationship between "la France" and "l'Algérie-femme". This is paralleled in the autobiographical sections by the heightening of subjective desire. Djébar no longer merely observes the desire of others (her parent's love, the romance of "la fille du gendarme") but is the receiver of "lettres d'amour". She becomes the object of desire, but also the desiring subject, and as such comes to represent a challenge to patriarchal order, and to her father in particular:

Chaque mot d'amour, qui me serait destiné, ne pourrait que rencontrer le diktat paternel. Chaque lettre, même la plus innocente, supposerait l'oeil constant du père, avant de me parvenir. Mon écriture, en entretenant ce dialogue sous influence, devenait en moi tentative - ou tentation - de délimiter mon propre silence. Mais le souvenir des exécuteurs du harem ressuscite; rappelle que tout papier écrit dans la pénombre rameute la plus ordinaire des inquisitions! (p,79)

As a desiring subject in her own right/write, she 'uncensors', unmask love, exposing desire in language: "Ecrire *devant* l'amour. Eclairer le corps, pour aider à lever l'interdit, pour dévoiler Décrire le visage de l'autre, pour maintenir son image; persister à croire en sa présence, en son miracle. Refuser la photographie, ou toute autre trace visuelle. Le mot seul, une fois écrit, nous arme d'une attention grave" (p. 79). But the desire to challenge paternal "diktat", to expose desire *in* language, only displaces a deeper primeval desire *for* language: "En fait, je recherche, *comme un lait* dont on m'aurait autrefois écartée, la pléthore amoureuse de la langue de ma mère. Contre la ségrégation de mon héritage, le mot plein de l'amour-au-présent me devient une parade hirondelle" (p. 80) [My emphasis]. The mother/mother-tongue

⁵³ Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises*, p. 33.

from which she is cut off is the original source and object of her semiotic yearnings, expressed in language reminiscent of Hélène Cixous's:

Même si la mystification phallique a contaminé généralement les bons rapports, la femme n'est jamais loin de la "mère" (que j'entends hors-rôle, la "mère" comme non-nom, et comme source des biens). Toujours en elle subsiste au moins un peu du bon lait-de-mère. *Elle écrit à l'encre blanche.*⁵⁴

Djebar can no longer draw the white ink of her maternal language. Instead she writes in blood-red ink, as she suffuses her writing with the flesh and blood of "mes aïeules, mes semblables" (p. 80), revealing a longing for the mother-tongue, and the mother-figures of the past, and an identity constructed not only by her entry into the paternal language, but also by her "exit" from the maternal language.

The Semiotic mode - Parts 1 and 2

The passages examined so far, from Parts 1 and 2 of the work, demonstrate a certain resistance to the symbolic but are nevertheless based in symbolic time and place. On two occasions, however, at the ends of Parts 1 and 2 respectively, Djebar abandons symbolic restraint and "retreats" into semiotic language, as we encounter two prose poems, "Biffure" (p. 62), a poem about the conquest of Algeria, and "Sistre" (p. 129), a poem about desire.

Desire in poetry

SISTRE

Long silence, nuits chevauchées, spirales dans la gorge. Râles, ruisseaux de sons précipices, sources d'échos entrecroisés, cataractes de murmures, chuchotements en taillis tressés, surgeons susurrant sous la langue, chuintements, et souque la voix courbe qui, dans la soute de sa mémoire, retrouve souffles souillés de soulerie ancienne.

Râles de cymbale qui renâcle, cirse ou ciseaux de cette tessiture, tessons de soupirs naufragés, clapotis qui glissent contre les courtines du lit, rires épars striant l'ombre claustrale, plaintes tiédies puis diffractées sous les paupières clauses dont le rêve s'égare dans quelque cyprière, et le navire des désirs cule, avant que craille l'oiseau de volupté.

⁵⁴ Hélène Cixous, *Le rire de la Méduse*, L'ARC, no 61, p. 44. [My emphasis]

Mots coulis, tisons délités, diorites expulsés des lèvres béantes, brandons de caresses quand s'éboule le plomb d'une mutité brutale, et le corps recherche sa voix, comme une plie remontant l'estuaire.

De nouveau râles, escaliers d'eau jusqu'au larynx, éclaboussures, aspersion lustrale, sourd la plainte puis le chant long, le chant lent de la voix femelle luxuriante enveloppe l'accouplement, en suit le rythme et les figures, s'exale en oxygène, dans la chambre et dans le noir, torsade tumescence de "forte" restés suspendus.

Soufflerie souffreteuse ou solennelle du temps d'amour, souffrière de chaque attente, fièvre des staccato.

Silence rempart autour de la fortification du plaisir, et de sa digraphie.

Création chaque nuit. Or broché du silence. (p. 129)

"Sistre"⁵⁵ is a poem about dual desire, sexual desire, and desire for the maternal language, Arabic. The emotional "autism" associated with the paternal language can be "sensed" in Djébar's writing-in-French. As Gauvin remarks, "Dans votre rapport à la langue française, dans cette écriture en français, on sent comme une nostalgie, une limite."⁵⁶ And, as Djébar herself acknowledges, this autism or "disorder of communication" interfered with her adolescent/adult relationships with disastrous results: "Je ne pouvais dire le moindre mot de tendresse ou d'amour dans cette langue, à tel point que c'était un vrai questionnement de femme. Ainsi avec certains hommes avec qui pouvait se dérouler un jeu de séduction, comme il n'y avait pas de passage à la langue maternelle, subsistait en moi une sorte de barrière invisible."⁵⁷

The nostalgia which Gauvin senses is a yearning for the Arabic language, which Djébar herself explicitly associates with "Sistre". In "Sistre" we find echoes of the maternal language, in an outpouring of desire expressed in the paternal language:

Ce n'est pas par hasard si dans *L'Amour, la fantasia* il y a un poème qui s'intitule "Sistre".... C'est un poème sur le désir et sur le plaisir. Je suis contrainte de passer à la poésie parce que ce texte-là tente d'investir par les mots français, tous mes dits de femme Et si je dis "tesson de soupirs", si je dis "circe ou ciseaux de cette tessiture", ce n'est pas pour écrire de la poésie

⁵⁵ "Sistre" refers to a jingling instrument used by ancient Egyptians especially in the rites of Isis (OED).

⁵⁶ Lise Gauvin, "Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien", *Littérature - L'Ecrivain et ses langues*, p. 79.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

savante. C'est parce que je tente de retrouver de possibles vers de la poésie arabe, où la langue fonctionne par allitérations.⁵⁸

Djebar confronts her emotional autism by a dual appeal to the maternal; firstly, by exploring the semiotic possibilities of the French language, and secondly, by suffusing it with the rhythms of the maternal language.

The poem is literally framed by silence, "Long silence...", "Or broché du silence", and between the silences desire arises, captured in the rolling waves of rhythmic language:

La langue rythmée porte donc une représentation, mais c'est une représentation, une vision striée: pas d'exclusion de l'oeil par l'oreille; la représentation retentit, le son se fait image, la pulsion invocante rencontre l'objet signifiable, vraisemblablement poly-logique La langue est là pour faire éclater la musique dans le vu..."⁵⁹

In "Sistre", "le son fait image"; sounds proliferate and multiply, both phonetically, by the sustained use of alliteration, and semantically, by the repeated references to a whole spectrum of sounds from "murmures", "chuchotements", to "souples", "rires", "plaintes", "chants", as well as to musical tone, "forte" and style "staccato". "La pulsion invocante" of this "langue rythmée" recalls its "objet signifiable", the sexual coalescence of man and woman.

The elongated vowels of "long silence" (l. 1) reinforce an initial sense of stillness, the soft consonants suggesting sensuousness and the increased number of syllables in the next two phrases, building up a slow sense of anticipation (l. 1-6). "Most primitive and profound of instincts, rhythm is central to Kristeva's semiotic"⁶⁰ Here a rhythmical wave-effect is achieved by the sudden stream of short phrases, piling up one after the other, lashing against the shore of desire, reinforced by the seductive semiotic pleasures of alliteration. The irregular, but continuous rhythms of the phrases mimic the oscillating pulsations of the chora. The intensity of desire is reinforced by the incessant use of alliteration and assonance, urgently and intimately

⁵⁸ Ibid. , p. 79.

⁵⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue*, p. 194.

⁶⁰ Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the problem of the subject*, p.175.

linking each word to the next in a dizzy and sensual interlacing of sounds and signifiers, of “échos entrecroisés” (the “r” sound of “râles”, “ruisseaux”, interlacing with “s” of “ruisseaux” and “précipices”, the repetition of “t”, “r” and “c” sounds in “entrecroisés” echoed in “cataractes”, the “t” interlacing with “s” in “taillis tressés, surgeons susurrant” etc.), as the coalescence of man and woman is echoed by the coalescence of signifier and signified in the onomatopoeia of “cataractes”, “chuchotements”, “chuintements” and “souffles”.

The scepticism towards syntactical unity (as in the omission of a main verb in the first sentence) reinforces the anti-symbolic stance of this poem. In the second half of the second sentence the pace suddenly changes. The climax is achieved as the pile-up of nominal and prepositional phrases is abruptly halted by the conjunction “et”. The pace is then slowed down by a cumbersome embedded phrase within a relative clause, finally giving way to the delayed verb. This, combined with the use of assonance, the barrage of “ou”, and “sou” sounds, slows down the tempo to a final stop.

Djebar claims that her use of alliteration in this poem conforms to the style of the poetry of her mother-tongue. According to Djebar, “Sistre” explicitly aims at reproducing the feel of Arabic poetry. But how far can this poem be seen to be mimicking the poetry of the mother-tongue?

A brief history of Arabic poetry.

The form of the prose poem is not common in Arabic poetry. Traditionally, the Arabic poem, or *quasida*, was confined to a rigid two-hemistich, monorhymed, monometred form, with each hemistich ending in a caesura. In *Modern Arabic Poetry*, Jayyusi asserts that the use of the caesura gives the “old” Arabic poem its permanent qualities of symmetry and equilibrium.⁶¹ Because audiences were so used

⁶¹ The caesura ensured that the verses were self-contained in terms of meaning and imagery. The self-contained quality made the single verse, with its balanced measures and symmetrical divisions, the unit in the poem. The self-contained single verse in this form became a closed unit “sealed” by the rhyme. However, the repetition of this unit, which could continue “as far as intention and rhyme allow”, made the poem as a whole “open and expansive”. The presence of these two opposing factors,

to the seasoned, well-measured, age old-rhythms, any departure from the traditional form was unacceptable. The ideals of symmetry and balance also determined the internal structure of the poem and its syntactic and semantic arrangements, making the form even more resistant to change.⁶²

Most of the poets who rose to fame in the twentieth century had access to foreign literature. Experiments took place concentrating on developing new rhyme-schemes, abandoning rhyme altogether, or creating poems with mixed metres with various stanzaic arrangements. These experiments were unsuccessful, as long as the poets still regarded the verse as the sole unit of poetic composition, and kept the caesuras which determined symmetry and balance. When in the mid-1940s poets succeeded in creating an acceptable form of free verse, it was because they finally abandoned the age-old adherence to a fixed number of feet and to two caesuras in each line. In this new free verse a poet made the single foot his or her basic unit, repeating it as many times as the artistic instinct dictated, in a single line. The form of the Arabic poem was liberated at last. Continued experiments led to the blossoming of prose poetry introduced by Khalil Gibran at the turn of the century ⁶³

The whole idea of prose being another medium for writing poetry was very difficult to impose on a poetic audience accustomed to the strong balanced rhythms of the old two-hemistich form. This resistance was further complicated by the revelation of the Koran (which although written in a highly rhetorical, rhythmical and rhyming prose which slips from time to time into metrical rhythm), contains within it a denial that it is poetry.⁶⁴

Only in the 1950s and 60s was prose accepted as an element of form in poetry. This happened with the rise of avant-garde poets who wrote only in prose, whose

closeness and openness, represented "the two opposing primary trends in art, which satisfy at once the need for limitation and freedom, containment and continuity, restraint and release". Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 8.

⁶² Ibid. , pp. 8-11.

⁶³ Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed.), *Modern Arabic Poetry -An Anthology*, pp. 10-12.

movement was strengthened by prominent modernists such as Adunis and Yusuf al-Khal, who wrote poems in verse and who also used prose as a poetic medium. Adunis is the poet whose influence is paramount on younger poets of the 1960s and later. His writing rises up from the heart of the classical tradition and demonstrates a great affinity with the diction of the Islamic mystics:⁶⁵

Writing in a diction as far removed from common speech as possible, he shunned direct statement and invested his language with mystery, obliquity, connotativeness, always creating new combinations of words that contravened conventional, logical sentence order Influenced by such great French poets as Rimbaud and particularly St. John Perse, he broke "the neck of logic" and produced highly original words and phrases derived from all aspects of poetic experience, as well as from philosophy, religion, and politics. There are times when he is too difficult, and resorts to exaggerated ambiguity, often sounding esoteric and pretentious. ⁶⁶

The accusations of pretentiousness are echoed in Djébar's "defence" of the deliberately obscure language of her own poem: "Et si je dis 'tesson de soupirs', si je dis 'circe ou ciseaux de cette tessiture', ce n'est pas pour écrire de la poésie savante." ⁶⁷

Djébar's use of prose poetry, like that of Adunis, borrows its form from Western poetry and aspects of its style not from traditional Arabic poetry but from the discourse of the Islamic mystics:

Islamic poetic prose is intellectual and clear, rhythmical and rhymed, highly polished, garnished with archaic expressions and rare and literary words ... It employs complicated techniques of alliteration, assonance, stereotype adjectives balanced with their synonyms and similes, with extensive use of nouns of pre-eminence, intensive and extensive verbs. The diction is noble and allows only the highly polished, rare and poetic words to be used in vague and imprecise expressions.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ In Surah 36:69, the Prophet affirms that the Koran is not to be interpreted as poetry, but as a spiritual message.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁶⁷ Lise Gauvin, "Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien", p. 79.

⁶⁸ S. Moreh, *Modern Arabic Poetry 1800-1970* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1976), p. 291.

Djebar's use of rhythm, assonance, and alliteration in "Sistre" mimics the style of Islamic mystical discourse, as does her predilection for embellished language, rare words, paradigmatic constructions and her resistance to fixed meaning and to the "developmental urgency" of the syntagmatic chain. Her prose poetry nevertheless avoids what Moreh calls the "monotonous elegance" of the Islamic mystics.

In *Repetition in Arabic Discourse*, Johnstone argues the Arabic language naturally tends towards the paradigmatic chain of language. She demonstrates that by means of the juxtaposition of paradigmatic structure in syntagmatic discourse, repetition, parallelism and paraphrase function as the main persuasive devices in Arabic discourse: "Repetition creates linguistic cohesion by *evoking* classes of items; it creates persuasive force by *creating* classes; and in doing each of these things it creates language."⁶⁹ Arabic argumentation is structured by the notion that it is in the presentation of an idea, "the linguistic forms and the very words that are used to describe it", that is persuasive, rather than the logical structure of proof characteristic of Western rhetoric. Texts are characterised by repetition at all levels: phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactical and semantic.

One form of syntactical parallelism which is analysed, "cumulative parallelism", is similar to the technique Djebar uses in "Sistre". Johnstone quotes examples from Arabic discourse and concludes as follows:

The parallelism in these examples is very tight at the beginnings of sentences ... but it becomes loose or non-existent at the ends. While in these examples as well, the parallelism is clearly cohesive, it is also what I have called cumulative, in that it reflects and signals a rhetorical rise in momentum. The ideas seem to come in increasingly larger waves, and the parallel or repeated terms at the beginning of each idea signal a new surge. While listing parallelism [exact syntactical parallelism and lexical echoing producing the effect of a list] indicates that the new item is textually and rhetorically the same as the preceding one, cumulative parallelism indicates that a new, more intense item is about to begin.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Barbara Johnstone, *Repetition in Arabic Discourse: Paradigms, Syntagms, and the Ecology of language* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1991), p. 119.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 106.

Johnstone claims that cumulative parallelism is a rhetorical device as well as a text-building one and that these two functions are in fact inseparable. As the paradigmatic class of items which share the repeated parallel "refrain" gets larger, the rhetorical effect of alluding to the class gets more forceful: "Each return to the parallelistic beginning resonates with more echo than the one before."⁷¹

In "Sistre", the rhythm of the first paragraph and of the following three paragraphs mimics the waves of desire, as each reaches a climax and then subsides in a long, slow ebbing. "Sistre" exemplifies a loose form of cumulative parallelism. The first three paragraphs are characterised by a pile-up of nominal and prepositional phrases (7 in the first, 6 in the second, 4 in the last), in each case suddenly interrupted by a break (comma), followed by a conjunction "et", and completed by a verbal phrase "et souque la voix" (l.5), "et le navire des désirs cule" (l.11), "et le corps recherche sa voix" (l.15). Whereas the parallelism at the beginning of each paragraph suggests increasing tension, the parallelism at the end of the paragraph serves to gradually slow down the pace and release the tension. The climaxing conjunction does not, as might be expected, occur sooner each time but follows an irregular pattern. The effect of repeated but irregular waves of language mimics the constant but erratic pulsations of the chora.

Johnstone comes to the conclusion that the Arabic language itself is inherently paradigmatic - it naturally works by pulsations, repetitions and waves rather than by rational persuasion along the logical syntagmatic chain: "... there are ways in which Arabic itself, and not just discourse in Arabic is parallelistic and paratactic."⁷² According to her, most of the Arabic discourse features which she examines (such as lexical couplets or conjoined, parallel verb phrases) were the result of relatively conscious choice on the part of the writers. She observes, however, that there are many cases in which the choice is not so free, cases in which a parallelistic or paratactic structure is chosen because it is *preferred* by the grammar of Arabic, or even because it is the *only choice* that the grammar allows.⁷³

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 106.

⁷² Ibid., p. 109. [My emphasis]

⁷³ Ibid., p. 110.

If this is the case, then in Kristeva's terms Arabic is an inherently more "maternal" language than French, a language more open to the semiotic, since it naturally resists the logical syntagmatic chain of language. Therefore, in terms of Djébar's writing, the Arabic language is doubly maternal - not only is it literally her mother-tongue but it by nature more maternal than the French language. However, because the syntagmatic resistance demonstrated by the Arabic language is "inbuilt" in the language, creating a sort of "compulsory repetitive/rhythmic tendency", it simultaneously implies a rigidity, which in turn perversely subverts Kristeva's notion of the semiotic's resistance to fixity.

The Arabic language is thus more open to, but also constrained by, the tendency towards paradigmatic patterning - it is a language bound to and bound by its tendency towards the poetic and therefore the semiotic. "Sistre" represents Djébar's language at its most semiotic in an outpouring of female desire foregrounding sound and rhythm. Like Phase 2 of Kristeva's model it embraces the maternal wholeheartedly, indulging in semiotic escapism, in the sublimation of meaning and in the playful dance of French signifiers pointing to their Arab signs.

A permanent alternation?- Part 3

In Parts 1 and 2 Djébar's desire to identify with the Mother-land surfaces in the occasional irruptions of semiotic language. This yearning resurfaces as the desire for the mother-tongue, in the semiotic waves of language of her prose-poems. In Part 3, however, the semiotic is neither an occasional nor an overwhelming presence but exists in a relationship of permanent alternation with the symbolic.

Part 3 is divided into five "movements" or "variations on a theme", each of which is divided into six parallel chapters which can be distinguished as follows:

1. Cris ⁷⁴
2. Voix
3. Sons
4. Corps/langue

⁷⁴ I have used the titles "Cris", "Sons", and "Corps-Langue" as my own categories in these three instances where Djébar does not provide a generic name.

5. Voix

6. Corps enlacés

Although Part 3 is not limited to a single historical period, it deals mainly with the War of Independence, relying on the oral testimonies of women who took part in the struggle, recorded by Djébar, and incorporated into the text. While in Parts 1 and 2, the semiotic is evident in occasional or overwhelming presence, in this final Part semiotic harmony with the Mother-land is achieved in experiences rooted in symbolic/historic time and place - in Djébar's communion with the "Mothers of the Revolution". Relying on the oral testimonies of these women, Djébar now frees her historical narrative completely from dependence on paternalistic colonialist texts.

Here too is evidence of a creative tension between the maternal and the paternal orders, between the semiotic and the symbolic, as the simple language of these ordinary women's stories is shot through by semiotic pulsations or rhythms, not by the oscillations of pre-Oedipal life but the rhythms and pulsations of the *mother-tongue* captured within the signifiers of the *paternal language*.

As we have seen, although in Parts 1 and 2 Djébar "thinks back through her fathers", these sections also reveal a maternal void - the Motherland stripped of her identity and the adolescent alienated from the mother figures of her childhood. In Part 3 Djébar frees herself from the paternal filter and attempts to fill this maternal void by consciously "thinking back through her mothers", by revisiting the world of women, mother-figures of past and present, and by reinvesting her language with the rhythms of the mother-tongue.

Les Cris

In "Les trances" (pp. 167-69), the semiotic is present within the boundaries of symbolic society, in the socially or "symbolically" acceptable ritual cries of "les femmes d'Algérie". The "cry" is the language of the body - female bodies, repressed by patriarchal law, who find temporary release in the primeval sounds and movements of "les trances". This ritualised form of temporary madness, while permitted by the laws of symbolic society, allows the boundaries of the symbolic to recede, as "les femmes d'Algérie" luxuriate in the semiotic indifferentiation of pre-

Oedipal sounds and rhythms, liberating mind and body from the pain of the present of history.

In "Les Transes", Djebbar describes how her maternal grandmother convenes her peers for a ritual dance which holds no promise of celebration "malgré les apparences, ce n'était pas la fête qui commençait" (p. 168). This is not a party but a parting, a release of repressed emotions and an escape into the realm of the senses. As the grandmother and her entourage work themselves up into a state of frenzy, there is a build-up of sound - "Les doigts bagués des 'chikhats' se mettaient à frapper les tambours", of voice - "l'insidieuse litanie du choeur montait dans la chambre enveloppée de fumées", of colour and movement - "Droite, la tête enturbannée de foulards bariolés, le corps allégé dans une tunique étroite, elle se mettait à danser lentement", and of rhythmic incantations, all building up to create a hot-house of emotions: "Laisse sortir le malheur! Que les dents de l'envie et de la convoitise t'épargnent, ô ma dame! Mets au jour ta force et tes armes, ô ma reine' La mélopée des autres reprenait son antienne, dans la torpeur chaude" (p. 168).

The escape into the rhythmic sensations brings the grandmother dangerously close to the madness present at the boundaries of thetic rupture: 'Enfin la crise intervenait: ma grand-mère, inconsciente, secouée par les tressaillements de son corps qui se balançait, entraînait en transes. Le rythme s'était précipité jusqu'à la frénésie" (p. 168). The reins of thetic control are in the hands of the blind woman: "L'aveugle entonnait son chant en solo continu et lyrique; à elle seule, elle tenait ferme les rênes de l'émotion collective" (p. 168). But the reins are gradually pulled back and raw emotion let loose: "L'aveugle adoucissait le thrène, le rendait murmure, rôle imperceptible; s'approchant de la danseuse, elle chuchotait pour finir, des bribes du Coran" (p. 168).

The rejection of the symbolic and the reactivation of the semiotic is evident in the relinquishment of thetic control as the grandmother's cries, posture and attire mimic those of a madwoman:

Un tambour scandant la crise, les cris arrivaient: du fond du ventre, peut-être même des jambes, ils montaient, ils déchiraient la poitrine creuse, sortaient enfin en gerbes d'arêtes hors de la gorge de la vieille. On la portait presque,

tandis que, transformant en rythmique ses plaintes quasi animales, elle ne dansait plus que de la tête, la chevelure dénouée, les foulards de couleurs violentes, éparpillés sur l'épaule. (p. 168/9)

As she surrenders to the beckoning rhythms of the semiotic, she finally expels the pain of symbolic exclusion: "Les cris se bouscullaient d'abord, se chevauchaient, à demi étouffés, puis ils s'exhalaient, gonflés en volutes enchevêtrées, en courbes tressées, en aiguilles. Obéissant au martèlement du tambour de l'aveugle, la vieille ne luttait plus: toutes les voix du passé bondissaient loin d'elle, expulsées hors de la prison de ses jours" (p. 169).

As the climax to the final exorcism ends, she is cruelly returned to the grim reality of symbolic life: "Une demi-heure ou une heure après, elle gisait au fond de son lit, en une masse qu'on apercevait à peine, tandis que, parmi les odeurs d'encens, les musiciennes mangeaient et devisaient. Leur magie de prêtresses païennes avait disparu pour laisser place, dans le jour, qui, à midi, semblait seulement commencer, à la laideur des visages exagérément fardés" (p. 169).

In this section, Djébar is thinking back "through her mothers", mothers and grandmothers imprisoned within the walls of Islamic society. The semiotic surfaces here at a social level, in the ritual reactivation of sensory experience. However, both the socially acceptable and temporary nature of this "escape" means that although it represents a departure from the symbolic, it also exists in relation to it. As such, it represents a balance between the two modalities, a desire for the semiotic which respects the laws of the symbolic.

Voix

In the "Voix" chapters, "les femmes d'Algérie" who took part in the War of Independence, tell their stories in the first person. Here the semiotic is present on a linguistic level, in the traces of the maternal language perceptible in the signs of the paternal language. These oral testimonies rise out of the blue - Brahimi notes that a "strange silence" surrounds these texts: "Le moment vient où l'effet immédiatement bouleversant de ces voix fait place à la perception d'un étrange silence qui les

entoure, et dans lequel elles font un écho d'autant plus poignant qu'il semble déjà lointain."⁷⁵

The opening paragraphs of the voice sections provide no referential markers - the reader is not told who the voices belong to, nor who they are addressed to, neither are the voices situated precisely in time or place.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the voices create their own presence, rising up as if from nowhere, speaking of the suffering of war, and asserting their defiance in the face of unspeakable adversity, their language the simple language of experience.

In these "voix" sections, Djébar "thinks back through the Mothers of the Revolution" and writes back through her mother-tongue, incorporating the oral testimonies of these women into the text "par une traduction voulue au premier degré".⁷⁷ Before examining one of the "voix" sections, I will look at the problems of reproducing Arab speech within a French text. In her examination of the processes at work when simulating the character of African speech in a European text, Zabus considers the terms "translation", "transference" and "transmutation" to be unsatisfactory, and settles for the linguistic term "*relexification*", referring to what she calls "Loretto Todd's felicitous formulation - 'the relexification on one's mother tongue using English vocabulary but indigenous structures and rhythms.'"⁷⁸

The emphasis here is both on "the lexis in the original sense of speech, word or phrase and on *lexicon* in reference to the vocabulary and morphemes of a language and, by extension, to word formation."⁷⁹ Zabus expands the term to include semantics and syntax as well, redefining relexification as "the making of a new register of communication out of an alien lexicon."⁸⁰ This new register of

⁷⁵ Denise Brahim, Post-face to Assia Djébar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Casablanca: EDDIF, 1992). p.265.

⁷⁶ When Djébar proceeds to describe her meetings with the women behind the voices in the "Corps enlacés" sections, it becomes clear that the voices are addressed to her.

⁷⁷ Quotation of Djébar's in Mildred Mortimer, "Entretien avec Assia Djébar, Ecrivain Algérien", p. 201.

⁷⁸ Loretto Todd, "The English Language in West Africa", in R. W. Bailey and M. Görlach (eds), *English as a World Language* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), p. 303. Quoted in Chantal Zabus, "Relexification", in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 314-18, p. 314.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 314.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 314.

communication, which is “neither the European target language nor the indigenous source language” functions as an “interlanguage” or as a “third register”...⁸¹ Zabus also draws a distinction between interpretative translation and relexification:

Unlike interpretative translation or the ‘lesser’ activity of *transcodage* which both take place between two texts - the original and the translated version - relexification is characterised by the absence of an original. It therefore does not operate from the language of one text to the other but from one language to the other within the same text. Such texts are palimpsests for, behind the scriptural authority of the target European language, the earlier, imperfectly erased remnants of the source language are still visible.⁸²

Djebar’s “Voix” are a combination of transcodage⁸³ and relexification - transcodage does take place between two “message events” (her original recorded interviews conducted in Arabic with the “Mothers of the Revolution”, and her “scriptural” French version of these interviews) but they are nevertheless also palimpsests, as Djebar consciously “operates from one language to the other within the same text”, using the techniques of relexification to “render visible the source language”. In the “voix” sections, this technique allows not only the recovery of a repressed identity but also, as Zabus suggests, the recovery of a repressed language: “... the linguistic remnants inhabiting the relexified text may lead to the discovery of the repressed source language.”⁸⁴

On a strategic level, the aim of relexification is “... to subvert the linguistically codified, to decolonize the language of early, colonial literature and to affirm a revised, non-atavistic orality via the imposed medium.”⁸⁵ On a strategic level Djebar also aims to decolonise, or deterritorialise the intertexts of “Les Pères de la colonisation” in Parts 1 and 2 of the work, by placing them in direct but conflictual dialogue with the voices of “Les Mères de la Révolution”.

⁸¹ Ibid. , p. 315.

⁸² Ibid. , p. 317.

⁸³ In the process of transcodage, Djebar occasionally slips into “un faux style oral”, using literary inversions (s’exclama-t-il) and inappropriate tenses, such as “le subjonctif imparfait” (J’eus peur qu’il me surprît).

⁸⁴ Ibid. , p. 317.

⁸⁵ Ibid. , p. 318.

The section entitled “voix” (p. 137) tells the story of Chérifa and begins when she is only thirteen years old. She tells of her experience at the hands of the French soldiers who burnt down her home three times. Her resistance to them precipitates her removal to “the plains”. She escapes, is reunited with her brother Ahmed, only to be expelled yet again. She then witnessed her brother’s death as he falls to the ground, shot. She escapes only to return to the scene later, where she finds her other brother, Abdelkader.

The story is introduced with very vague time and place markers: “Mon frère aîné, Abdelkader, était monté au maquis, cela faisait quelque temps déjà. La France arriva jusqu’à nous, nous habitions à la zaouia sidi M’Hamed Aberkane La France est venue et elle nous a brûlés” (p. 137). The simplicity and slowness of Chérifa’s expression, combined with the terseness of her language, conveys an effect of dignified suffering. The first sentence, with its broken syntax (proper name “Abdelkader” juxtaposed and placed between commas), sets the slow, deliberate pace. Here, and throughout the text, the adverbial clauses of time are relegated to the end of the sentence and placed after a comma, as Djébar rejects syntactical convention to mimic the pregnant pauses of speech.

In order to suffuse her “voices” with the sounds and signs of the maternal language, Djébar makes considerable use of transliteration (a technique not restricted to the voice sections, but which predominates here), as well as the direct translation of Arabic expressions: “La France arriva jusqu’à nous, nous habitions a la zaouia Sidi M’hammed Aberkane⁸⁶.” Here Chérifa says “France”, meaning the French army. Other phrases such as “ceux de la montagne” echo the Arabic term, in this case “jabaliin”, “jabal” meaning mountain with the suffix “in”, denoting possession.

Djébar also reproduces Arabic syntax, in sentences such as “Toi, avec l’une de tes soeurs, reviens; ...” (p. 139). In Arabic the pronoun can be used before or after the imperative verb, and can be separated from it by an adverbial phrase.

The most significant way in which the text mimics the repressed source language is, however, by the use of repetition. Repetition not only slows down the text but also

emphasises its lack of linearity. Its use as a persuasive device is characteristic of Arabic discourse. As Johnstone remarks, persuasion is as much the result of the sheer number of times an idea is stated than it is the consequence of 'logical' organization".⁸⁷

The use of repetition reinforces the impact of Chérifa's story. Repetition of "La France" on the one hand, and "les Frères", on the other, introduces the manicheistic opposition between "them" and "us", coloniser and colonised. The repetition of the verb "brûler", which occurs seven times in the first seven paragraphs, and the use of syntactical parallelism - "La France est venue et elle nous a brûlés." ... "De nouveau les soldats revinrent; de nouveau ils nous brûlèrent" ... "La zaouia a brûlé; notre douar aussi va brûler!" - mimic the rhythm of the mother-tongue, and serve to foreground the persistent cruelty of the French army (p. 137).

The death of Chérifa's brother is described in very simple yet moving language. Paraphrase is used to convey the force of Chérifa's pain on witnessing the shooting: "Il courait devant moi quand il est tombé: une balle l'atteignit à l'oreille. Il est tombé devant moi Il est tombé sur la face et, dans sa chute, il a même renversé un garçon qui s'est blessé sur la pierre. Mais le garçon s'est relevé" (p. 140). The first sentence provides the basic fact of the incident. In sentences 2 and 3 this fact is restated more concisely, and then more graphically.

Johnstone uses the notion of "presence" to illustrate the rhetorical force of paraphrase. She argues that the very fact of making something present in discourse makes it valuable and important. The implication is that the more often it is made present, the more valuable and important it appears. Johnstone argues that "presence" can be created in a number of ways - by "the extensions of spatial and temporal deixis to the realm of the rhetorical" (with the use of expressions such as "Look here" or "Now the first point is"), by "the use of the present tense in historical accounts to create a sense of temporal proximity" (as Chérifa does) or by "giving

⁸⁶ "La zaouia" refers to the headquarters of the Moslem brotherhood.

⁸⁷ Barbara Johnstone, *Repetition in Arabic Discourse: Paradigms, Syntagms, and the Ecology of language*, p. 108.

details and piling up conditions for, or the consequences of, an act.⁸⁸ A slow style invokes “presence” by creating emotional closeness: “While a rapid style is effective in reasoning, a slow style creates emotion.”⁸⁹ Presence can also be created by accumulation or insistence. According to Johnstone, one of the most important ways that presence is created in Arabic is through repetition, and paraphrastic repetition in particular.⁹⁰

Djebar’s use of a slow style and repetitive rhythms allow the traces of the maternal language to affect the signifiers of the paternal language, which in turn resist the syntagmatic chain of language. Because of this resistance to logical or syntagmatic succession, the voice section appear to have no construction, just as the pulsating oscillations of the chora appear to have no controlling force, no unity or identity. But just as the rhythmic space of the chora is nevertheless subjected to a “regulating process”, so the rhythmic space of the text which appears “unconstructed”, is nevertheless subject to a regulating process, which creates presence through the effect of accumulated repetition. The result is not a well-constructed argument against colonisation but the eloquent rhetoric of “la voix qui chavire”, quietly but convincingly condemning her oppressors.

Sons

Each of the “sons” sections are lyrical rewritings of the “voix” sections which immediately precede them. Here it is Djebar’s voice (repressed in the “voix” sections where “les Mères de la Révolution” take the lead) which comes to the fore. In these “sons” sections the semiotic is displaced from the maternal to the paternal language. The simple tone of her compatriots’ stories, pervaded by the slow rhythms of the maternal language, now contrast dramatically with Djebar’s own virtuoso use of the poetic possibilities of the French language, as she begins to retell their stories in her own voice.

⁸⁸ Ibid. , p. 92.

⁸⁹ Vico cited in Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation*, trans. John Wilkenson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 144. Quoted in Barbara Johnstone, *Repetition in Arabic Discourse: Paradigms, Syntagms, and the Ecology of language*, p. 92, 93.

⁹⁰ Ibid. , p. 94.

Having met “Les Mères de la Révolution”, and listened to their stories, it is as if Djébar has a vivid, dream-like vision of their experiences, which she then inscribes into the text, leaving traces of sounds, colours and movements. Djébar thus passes from the rhythms of the maternal language (in the “Voix” sections) to the semiotic possibilities of the French language (in the “Sons” sections), which rather than being marked by the rhythms of simple repetition, depend on the rich play of sound, movement and colour and on the release of the signifier, here let loose to explore and surround the story of Chérifa.

Here again we have semiotic resonances, not so much in the refusal of linearity, but in the privileging of the senses. This is a subjective, sensuous rewriting of Chérifa’s story rather than a rational analysis of it. Djébar is “feeling” Chérifa’s suffering not “colonising” her story. It is as if all the emotion held back in Chérifa’s slow lamento bursts forth and is poured out into Djébar’s “clameur”.

In this passage Djébar bypasses the facts of the story already provided in the preceding “Voix”, and instead focuses on the moment of highest emotion - the moment at the end of Chérifa’s story when she returns to find the dead body of her brother. Djébar’s semiotic “vision” of this moment of intense suffering is recovered through an impressionist wave of sound, colour, smell, and movement. It is as if she takes the final bars of Chérifa’s song and sets them to music, as she plays the haunting tune of suffering again and again. The leitmotif, “le cri”, the sound of suffering, is replayed as Djébar keeps revisiting that ultimate moment of discovery. Trying to capture the essence of Chérifa’s pain, she draws out the cry throughout the passage so that as if by alternatively stretching it, rewinding the sound, then freezing it, she can stop time and enter into Chérifa’s story, enter into her pain, in an attempt to identify with the suffering of this “femme” and all the other “femmes d’Algérie”.

The impressionist haze is reinforced by the use of colour imagery to describe Chérifa who emerges in a blur of yellow, red, green and gold: “Les longs cheveux jaunâtres de la fillette ont dû virer d’un coup au rouge flamboyant, autrefois. Les commères soupçonneuses avaient qualifié ses yeux verts de ‘yeux de chatte rôdeuse’” (p. 143). “Larges yeux verts aux prunelles tachetées d’or.” The blood red of her henna-stained hands gives way to her brother’s bloodied corpse: “La voici orpheline du frère

tombé, dans cette aube de l'été immobile; nouvelle Antigone pour l'adolescent étendu sur l'herbe, elle palpe, de ses doigts rougis au henné, le cadavre à demi dénudé" (p. 143).

The story proceeds as if in slow motion as Djébar suspends time and foregrounds the odours, sounds and gestures of the moment. It is as if time itself is momentarily restrained, holding back the inevitable cry of suffering: "L'oued, pas tout à fait sec, circule dans un creux de ronces et de mousses parfumées. En contrebas, la source fait entendre son bruissement. A quelques pas, en un cercle irrégulier, quatre hommes circonspects sont tournés vers un cinquième, plus trapu, raidi dans son uniforme: c'est le second frère Amroune. Il halète, il esquisse un geste vers la fille" (p. 143).

The brother's silent movement reinforces an uneasy sense of stillness, of death: "Le cadavre dort, face contre terre" (p. 143). The first sound of suffering comes as the cry of unbelief as Chérifa splashes water on his face, and he does not wake:

Ensuite elle s'est tournée, pour protester, ou se convaincre.

-Mais il est tombé devant moi! devant moi!

Elle a répété sa plainte, la deuxième fois sur un mode plus aigu. Son accent se déchire, comme si elle déplaçait derrière elle le linceul." (pp. 143-44).

Time and the elements stand still in a moment of uneasy expectation as Djébar's screen is filled with the image of Chérifa alone, the background slowly receding: "Tout alors a fait silence: la nature, les arbres, les oiseaux (scansion d'un merle proche qui s'envole). Le vent, dont on devinait la brise à ras du sol, s'asphyxie; les cinq hommes se voient devenir témoins inutiles, dans le gel de l'attente. Elle seule ..." (p. 144).

The silence is suddenly broken by a prolonged cry, its pathos reinforced by the reminder of Chérifa's youthfulness: "Elle a entonné un long premier cri, la fillette". The voice takes on a life of its own, becomes a song of suffering: "... la voix jaillit, hésitante aux premières notes, une voile à peine dépliée qui frémirait, au bas d'un mât de misaine. Puis le vol démarre précautionneusement, la voix prend du corps dans l'espace" (p. 144). This song of suffering, which slowly soars to a full-throated

clamour, merges with the voices of "les femmes d'Algérie": "... quelle voix? Celle de la mère que les soldats ont torturée sans qu'elle gémissse, des soeurs trop jeunes, parquées mais porteuses de l'angoisse aux yeux fous, la voix des vieilles du douar qui, bouches béantes, mains décharnées, paumes en avant, font face à l'horreur du glas qui approche" (p. 144).

The cry has been elongated, has become voice, the voice which merges into other voices but is nevertheless still there, suspended in time and space: "Au-dessus de l'abîme, les hommes rivés la regardent: faire face à la durée du cri qui tangué, tel le balancement d'un drap de sang s'égouttant au soleil" (pp. 144-45). The cry surrounds the body, as odours give way to sounds, and, as signifier and signified coalesce, the signifiers resonate with sound, their movement mimicking the rhythm of the cadences: "Le cadavre, lui, s'en enveloppe, semble retrouver sa mémoire: miasmes, odeurs, gargouillis. Il s'inonde de touffeur sonore. La vibration de la stridulation, le rythme de la déclamation langent ses chairs pour parer à leur décomposition" (p. 145).

But the cry, the story and the last word belong to Chérifa. As Chérifa dulls her pain by taking comfort in the rhythmic rocking reminiscent of semiotic oscillations, "Le corps de la fillette de treize ans se meut alors par soudaine nécessité, va et vient pour scander la douleur..." (p. 144), Djébar feels her pain and takes comfort in her rhythmic tribute: "Elle s'appelle Chérifa. Quand elle entame le récit, vingt ans après, elle n'évoque ni l'inhumation, ni un autre ensevelissement pour le frère gisant dans la rivière" (p. 145).

Corps/langue.

"L'Ecole Coranique" (p. 206) explores the relationship between language and body. Although the French language is associated with physical freedom, it is Arabic which is dubbed the language of the soul. Djébar describes how her initiation into the French language brings her freedom of movement: "A l'âge où le corps aurait dû se voiler, grâce à l'école française, je peux davantage circuler" (p. 206). In contrast, the act of writing in Arabic is compared to an act of physical love:

Quand la main écrit, lente posture du bras, précautionneuse pliure du flanc en avant ou sur le côté, le corps accroupi se balance comme dans un acte d'amour. Pour lire, le regard prend son temps, aime caresser les courbes, au moment où l'inscription lève en nous le rythme de la scansion: comme si l'écriture marquait le début et le terme d'une possession. (p. 208).

Arabic is the language of love, the language of rhythm. The slow, comforting, rhythmic pace of the Arabic language is contrasted with the heady, speedy release which the French language brings: "Comme si soudain la langue française avait des yeux, et qu'elle me les ait donnés pour voir dans la liberté, comme si la langue française aveuglait les mâles voyeurs de mon clan et qu'à ce prix, je puisse circuler, dégringoler toutes les rues, annexer le dehors pour mes compagnes cloîtrées, pour mes aïeules mortes bien avant le tombeau" (p. 208).

This dual entry into language creates in her a dual sense of identity and propels her into a no-mans land, "une dichotomie de l'espace", pulling her in two directions, as she is torn between "le dehors et le risque, au lieu de la prison de mes semblables" (p. 212). And "la chance", the stroke of luck which enables her to acquire the French language, brings only a superficial freedom - it frees the body but not the soul. It creates a sense of unreality, of dislocation. The "symbolic world" into which the French language propels her is a world which is literally hundreds of miles away, creating in her a geographical dislocation, which in turn engenders emotional alienation:

J'écris et je parle français au-dehors: mes mots ne se chargent pas de réalité charnelle. J'apprends des noms d'oiseaux que je n'ai jamais vus, des noms d'arbres que je mettrai dix ans ou davantage à identifier ensuite, des glossaires de fleurs et de plantes que je ne humerai jamais avant de voyager au nord de la Méditerranée. En ce sens, tout vocabulaire me devient absence, exotisme sans mystère, avec comme une mortification de l'oeil qu'il ne sied pas d'avouer Les scènes des livres d'enfant, leurs situations me sont purs scénarios; dans la famille française, la mère vient chercher sa fille ou son fils à l'école; dans la rue française, les parents marchent tout naturellement côte à côte Ainsi, le monde de l'école est expurgé du quotidien de ma ville natale tout comme de celui de ma famille. A ce dernier est dénié tout rôle référentiel (p. 212).

Being pulled in two directions, living in two worlds, produces a sense of malaise, "un début de vertige" (p. 213). Unable to settle within either world, she is propelled

endlessly between them in an incipient vertigo. In this exploration of body/language or body-language, the semiotic, in the sense of maternal identification, is, as in the autobiographical sections in Parts 1 and 2, located at the level of the maternal language being present as absence, as a lost love/r prised away by paternal decision and replaced by further absence, the literal absence of "la France", the world with which the paternal language is identified, and the intellectual and emotional absence which this dislocation produces.

Yet, in the first "Corps/langue", Djébar suggests that emotional absence/distance can be and was overcome, as if by miracle, by a return to the mother-tongue:

Si je désirais soudain, par caprice, diminuer la distance entre l'homme et moi, il ne m'était pas nécessaire de montrer, par quelque mimique, mon affabilité. Il suffisait d'opérer le passage à la langue maternelle: revenir, pour un détail, au son de l'enfance, c'était envisager que sûrement la camaraderie complice, peut-être l'amitié, et pourquoi pas, par miracle, l'amour pouvait surgir entre nous comme risque mutuel de connaissance. (p. 150)

And, just as emotional distance is bridged here, on a personal level, by a return to the mother-tongue, so emotional distance, recalled on a thematic level in the "corps/langue" sections, is structurally bridged by the construction of the text. For these sections are surrounded by the presence of the semiotic - a presence perceptible in the lyrical resonance of the preceding "sons", and in the maternal rhythms of the succeeding "voix".

Corps enlacés - Meetings with Chérifa and Lla Zohra

In "Corps enlacés", Djébar uncovers the faces behind the "voix" sections, as she recounts her actual meetings with Chérifa and Lla Zohra, whom she visits in their mountain homes. Lla Zohra, the cousin of Djébar's grand-mother, is now in her eighties; Chérifa is married to "un veuf taciturne". As Djébar thinks back through the mothers of the revolution, the pressure of the semiotic on the symbolic of language (in the "voix/sons" sections), becomes the presence of the mother-figures in the symbolic present of history.

“Corps enlacés” represents the counterpoint to Djébar’s “aphasie amoureuse”, the mutual embrace of women united by the bonds of sisterly love. The encounter with these women is energised by a sense of Djébar’s own presence and charged by a sense of emotional openness. It is as if Djébar’s sense of self, which is often masked by anguish or confusion in this “préparation à l’autobiographie”, is finally liberated as she gives herself and her emotions freely to her “sisters”. Her unbridled affection for her “petite soeur” and “petite mère” is revealed both by word and by gesture: “Nous nous embrassons, nous nous touchons, nous nous admirons” (p. 190). It is as if in the intimacy of this maternal embrace she finally recaptures “le mot plein de l’amour-au présent” (p. 80).

But the “Corps enlacés” sections reveal not only the comforts but also the limits of the semiotic. For, just as the state of semiotic indifferentiation must eventually be ruptured by the thetic phase, so the state of harmony with the maternal figures cannot be preserved. Djébar’s ultimate separation from “les femmes d’Algérie” is the inevitable result of her writing in the paternal/symbolic language: “Mots torches qui éclairent mes compagnes, mes complices; d’elles définitivement, ils me séparent. Et sous leur poids, je m’expatrie” (p. 165).

And just as the semiotic exerts pressure on language but cannot dominate it without causing psychosis, so the maternal rhythms of Arabic, although exerting pressure on Djébar’s French, cannot be fully realised in it, without causing unintelligibility. The realisation of the limits of the paternal language cause Djébar to cry out in frustration as she realises the impossibility of capturing the voice and image of Chérifa within the signs of the oppressor’s language: “A peine si je frôle l’ombre de ton pas!”. Language, identity and society must all submit to the rule of symbolic detachment which separates not only the mother-child continuum, but also the maternal and paternal languages, and ultimately separates Djébar from her compatriots.

However, the comfort of pre-Oedipal indifferentiation is recovered, if only fleetingly. Djébar’s meeting with Lla Zohra offers the most striking example of this, in an embrace of “corps enlacés”, where Djébar relives the maternal security of childhood: “Ces nuits de Ménacer, j’ai dormi dans ton lit, comme autrefois je me blottissais, enfant, contre la mère de mon père” (p. 193). This meeting of Djébar and Lla Zohra

represents a salutary moment of presence and harmony, a moment of belonging, of communion which transcends the alienation of her youth, a rediscovery of the accepting presence of the mother-figure, to whom she addresses her words:

Là, ta voix a poursuivi le récit. Le soleil demeurait haut. Tu t'es assise, le voile rabaissé à la taille, parmi les ajoncs et les herbes de printemps. Ton visage finement ridé mais austère - une rêverie fermant légèrement ses traits - , je le photographiai parmi les coquelicots Le soleil baissa peu à peu. Nous sommes revenues dans le silence du soir." (p. 191)

This moment of harmony has a rare dream-like quality about it. Djébar captures the moment in a photograph, its image the ultimate evidence that she was, if only fleetingly, at one with herself, her land and her people.

Conclusion

An analysis of the impact of the semiotic on the four identified divisions of "L'Amour, la fantasia" reveals only a superficial conformity to the Kristevan model. Djébar's historical sections at first appear to conform to the symbolic/historic tendencies of phase 1 of that model. They reconstruct events framed in historic time and place, they display Algeria's desire for French recognition, and they depend on paternalistic colonialist texts. However the text manages to subvert this superficial parallelism. Djébar's increasingly subjective writing, her transposition of the relationship between France and Algeria onto the plane of desire, her fragmented style and her manipulation of symbolic time conspire to undermine any analogy with traditional "objective" historical discourse. Moreover her manipulation of colonialist discourse reinforces rather than undermines her increasingly passionate identification with the mother-land, with its overtones of subjectivity and semiotic desire.

The autobiographical sections appear to conform to the symbolic/paternal tendency as Djébar "thinks back through her fathers" and retraces her entry into the paternal language/order. However, despite the paternal filter, these sections also reveal the presence of the semiotic/maternal as absence. For although Djébar's identity is reconstructed by her entry into the paternal language, it is nevertheless marked by the absence of the mother-tongue. Subjectivity is constructed in opposition to the objectifying tendency of the paternal order but also in relation to the lost maternal

order - a lost order which Djébar consciously attempts to recover in the final part of the work.

Part 3 goes a long way towards achieving the Kristevan ideal of the permanent alternation of the semiotic and symbolic modalities. The loss of maternal identification revealed in the historical/autobiographical sections is consciously redressed as Djébar “thinks back through her mothers”. The semiotic becomes a constant presence existing in an alternating relationship to the symbolic. Her desire for the mother-land is transposed into symbolic/social experiences rooted in historical time and place - her re/union with the mothers of the revolution. The voices of these women are trapped in the signs of the paternal language but are nevertheless shot through by the maternal or semiotic, not by the rhythms and pulsations of the mother-child continuum, but by the rhythms and pulsations of the mother-tongue, Arabic.

The dynamic interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic in *L'Amour, la fantasia*, especially in the final part, marks Djébar out as a writer of Kristevan credentials.

“Une alternance constante entre le temps et sa “vérité”, l’identité et sa perte, l’histoire et ce qui la produit hors-temps, hors-phénomène. Dialectique impossible des deux termes, alternance permanente: jamais l’un sans l’autre. Il n’est pas sûr que quelqu’un en soit capable ici, maintenant. Peut-être une femme?”⁹¹

Perhaps a woman?

Surely Djébar?

⁹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Des Chinoises* (Paris: des femmes, 1974). p. 44.

In dialogue with Cixous: *Vaste est la prison*

Introduction

Djebar and Cixous come to the same conclusions about the way patriarchy constructs both language and the dynamics of human relationships. Both authors identify patriarchal society as a “prison-house”, “une vaste prison”, where both sexual identity and language are imprisoned within rigid oppositional structures. Their response to these linguistic and sexual structures influences their relationship to writing and their portrayal of male-female dynamics.

The form of their response is very different. Whereas Cixous presents her *sorties* in what have been described as her “more theoretical” texts, *La Jeune Née* and *La Venue à l’écriture*, Djebar’s response takes the form of a novel which contains three distinct stories, a love story, a historical quest and a family history.

Cixous discovers many *sorties*, or ways out from the hegemony of patriarchy. She achieves this by exploring new ideas of *écriture* and sexuality. The question I would like to explore is the following: Does Djebar find ways out of the prison-house of patriarchy and if she does, how do her *sorties* compare to those of Cixous?

I will start by looking at Cixous’s analysis of the oppositionary patriarchal value-system and then touch on other aspects of Cixous’s thinking which will be expanded on in the study of *Vaste est la prison*.

Cixous and the patriarchal value system

The patriarchal value-system - opposition

Cixous analyses the phenomenon of opposition at the heart of the patriarchal value-system and then proceeds to challenge this opposition (which can be reduced in relational terms to the opposition of the self *to* the other) with an embracing of otherness or “le procès du même *et* de l’autre.”¹

¹ Hélène Cixous, “Le Rire de la Méduse”, *L’Arc*, 61, pp. 39-54, p. 46.

“Sorties” begins with Cixous’s well-known analysis of patriarchal binary thought. Although her analysis is derivative, not to say ‘derrivative’, its originality lies in her identification of the process of death at work within this kind of thought. Cixous introduces it simply with the words “Où est-elle?” inviting the reader to locate woman, or rather to find the place where she has been located by the patriarchal value system:

Où est elle?
 Activité/passivité
 Soleil/Lune
 Culture/Nature
 Jour/Nuit
 Père/Mère
 Tête/sentiment
 Intelligible/sensible
 Logos/Pathos...
Homme
 Femme²

“Où est elle?” Within each of these binary oppositions woman is located as the “weaker sex” or the weaker term, “the negative, powerless instance”.³ Each opposition (active/passive, father/mother) operates as a hierarchy, replicating the underlying male/female paradigm, with its inescapable positive/negative association: “Homme/Femme Supérieur/Inférieur La pensée a toujours travaillé par opposition Par oppositions duelles, *hiérarchisées*”.⁴ According to Cixous, these opposite or binary terms are not on “equal terms” but exist within a hierarchical relationship in which death is at work, and where one term must destroy the other in order to assert its own identity, its own signification: the battle for “signifying supremacy” is on⁵: “Champ de bataille général. Chaque fois une guerre est livrée. La mort est toujours à l’oeuvre.”⁶

As well as determining the relationship between these dialectical couples, opposition is also at work within the fundamental male/female couple:

² Hélène Cixous, en collaboration avec Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née* (Paris: UGE 1975), p.115.

³ Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics*, p. 104.

⁴ Hélène Cixous in collaboration with Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née*, p. 115.

⁵ Ibid. , p. 105.

⁶ Ibid. , pp. 116-17.

Et tous les couples d'oppositions sont des *couples*. Est-ce que cela veut dire quelque chose? Que le logocentrisme soumette la pensée, - tous les concepts, les codes, les valeurs à un système à deux termes est-ce que c'est en rapport avec "le" couple homme/femme?⁷

So men and women are also locked together in the battle for signifying supremacy, where man's inevitable victory deprives woman, the vanquished party, of any positive identity. She exists only as an object, a receptacle for male desire, a blank page onto which he can inscribe himself: "Elle n'existe pas, elle peut ne pas être; mais il faut qu'il y en ait. De la femme, dont il ne dépend plus, il ne garde alors que cet espace, toujours vierge, matière soumise au désir qu'il veut imprimer".⁸ It is this annihilation of positive identity which Cixous equates with death. And, as woman is annihilated, erased, man is constructed as the norm, "éternel-naturel"⁹:

La mise en question de cette solidarité du logocentrisme et du phallocentrisme est aujourd'hui devenue assez pressante - la mise au jour du sort fait à la femme, de son enfouissement - pour menacer la stabilité de l'édifice masculin qui se fait passer pour éternel naturel; en faisant surgir du côté de la féminité des réflexions, des hypothèses nécessairement ruineuses pour le bastion qui détient encore l'autorité.¹⁰

For Cixous the challenge is to resist this logocentrism by defying the logic of binary oppositions which underpins both patriarchal ideology and the rigid concepts of identity and language which it creates. And the enemy she resists is everywhere. For patriarchy operates like an unstoppable sorting-machine, sifting through all discourses and compulsively creating oppositions within them: "Partout (où) intervient une mise en ordre, une loi organise le pensable par oppositions (duelles, irréconciliables; ou relevables, dialectiques)."¹¹

⁷ Ibid. , p. 116.

⁸ Ibid. , p. 118.

⁹ Feminist critique usually points to patriarchy's association of *woman* to "nature". In this context, however, where Cixous refers to the *masculine* using the terms "éternel-naturel", it is in the sense of masculinity being perceived as "the eternal norm".

¹⁰ Ibid. , p. 119.

¹¹ Ibid. , p. 116.

Countering opposition with otherness

Cixous “opposes” or rather challenges this law of opposition with the concept of *différance*, where meaning is achieved in relation to *the absent other*.¹²

Appropriating Derrida’s anti-structuralist stance, Cixous rejects the theory that meaning is produced through the relation of opposites, opposite terms by which the “higher” term is dependant on the “lower” term for its meaning. The concept of a rigid structure is replaced by the idea of a fluid chain of signification, in which “meaning is never truly present but is only constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to other, absent signifiers.”¹³

For Cixous *une écriture* which works by deferral rather than opposition defies the hierarchical male economy. Working on the difference, this *écriture féminine* “revel[s] in the pleasures of open-ended textuality”¹⁴, where meaning can never be pinned down to the fixed positions of the binary straight-jacket, where it is always elusive, always deferred, constantly propelled forward by the endless free-play of the signifier: “dynamisés à l’infini par un incessant échangeement de l’un entre l’autre sujet différent ... parcours multiple et inépuisable à milliers de rencontres et transformations du même dans l’autre et dans l’entre...”¹⁵

Cixous not only proposes a release from unitary meaning through the free-play of the signifier; she also proposes a release from a unitary sexual identity, through her idea of bisexuality. Her answer to opposition in sexual identity is found in a new definition of bisexuality which replaces the exclusive, hierarchical relationship between “les deux sexes” with an inclusive notion of masculinity and femininity, which allows for the coexistence of the same and the other:

Bisexualité, c’est-à-dire repérage en soi, individuellement, de la présence, diversement manifeste et insistante selon chaque un ou une, des deux sexes,

¹² “The word is of Derrida’s own coinage and is deliberately ambiguous ... being derived from the French *différer* which means both to ‘defer, postpone, delay’ and to ‘differ, be different from’”. Ann Jefferson and David Robey (eds) *Modern Literary Theory - A Comparative Introduction* (London: Batsford, 1982), p. 115.

¹³ Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics*, p. 106.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁵ Hélène Cixous, “Le Rire de la Méduse”, p. 46.

non-exclusion de la différence ni d'un sexe, et à partir de cette "permission" que l'on se donne, multiplication des effets d'inscription du désir, sur toutes les parties de mon corps et de l'autre corps.¹⁶

This process of the same and the other also forms the basis of Cixous's writing practice, of her *écriture féminine*. Here the positive relation to the other is associated with motherhood and childbirth as a metaphor for the writer's potential to develop beyond the self towards a creative rather than destructive relationship to the other. This openness to the other, which challenges the self-referential limits of the male economy of relations, is achieved by engaging with the unconscious (or the *other* within the self).

By submitting to the unconscious, the writer travels beyond the self-referential boundaries of the symbolic, to join with the collective unconscious (the others outside the self) to produce *une écriture de l'autre*. Because this *écriture* is located in what Cixous describes as an in-between zone, on the boundary between the symbolic and the imaginary, the writer can tune into the primeval Voice of the Mother: "La Voix, chant d'avant la loi, avant que le souffle soit coupé par le symbolique, réapproprié dans le langage sous l'autorité séparante. La plus profonde, la plus ancienne et adorable visitation."¹⁷, thus transgressing the order of patriarchy and its Law of the Father.

Before relating Djébar's "vaste prison" to Cixous's binary prison-house, I will look at the form and content of the novel, using Cixous's conception of the subject.

Vaste est la prison - "A subject is at least a thousand people"

... A subject is at least a thousand people.

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, pp. 155-56.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 172.

This is why I never ask myself “who am I” (*qui suis-je?*) I ask myself “who are I?” (*qui sont-je?*) an untranslatable phrase. Who can say who I are, how many I are, which I is the most of my Is? Of course we each have a solid social identity, all the more solid and stable as all our other phases of identity are unstable, surprising. At the same time *we are all the ages, those we have been, those we will be, those we will not be*, we journey through ourselves (Joyce, Shakespeare remind us) as the child who goes snivelling to school and as the broken old man We: are (untranslatable). Without counting all the combinations with others, *our exchanges between languages, between sexes* - our exchanges which change us, tint us with others.”¹⁸

Vaste est la prison is divided into four parts, as follows:

Part 1: “L’effacement dans le coeur” tells the story of “*an exchange between sexes*”. It is the story of Isma’s¹⁹ infatuation with a younger man (she is in her late thirties, living in Algeria, and married at the time). Isma’s relationship with “l’Aimé”, as she calls him, is the counterpoint to her relationship to “le mari.” This first story will be examined in terms of a “tale of two couples” - Isma and her husband; Isma and “l’Aimé”.

Part 2: “L’effacement sur la pierre” is the site of “*an exchange between languages*”. This second story takes the form of a historical quest following the journeys made by nineteenth and twentieth century explorers to a stela on which a mysterious script is inscribed. The script is eventually revealed to be the Touareg alphabet, the original Berber language which was “owned” by a matriarchal society - *une écriture des femmes*.

Part 3: “Un silencieux désir”, is a family history where, like Cixous, Djébar identifies with those members of her family “*of all the ages*”, journeying through the lives of

¹⁸ Susan Sellers (ed.), *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1994), with English preface by Hélène Cixous, pp. XVII-XVIII, p.XVII-XVII. [My emphasis]

¹⁹ Lise Gauvin, “Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien”, *Littérature - L’Ecrivain et ses langues*, 101 (February 1996), pp. 73-87. Although Djébar uses first person narration in both Parts 1 and 3, in Part 3 she also occasionally refers to the narrator in the third person, as Isma. I have used the name Isma in Part 1, to avoid the clumsy term “Narrator”, and the unambiguously autobiographical, Djébar. In the interview with Gauvin, Djébar refers to incidents in the Preface and Part 3 of *Vaste est la prison*, in such a way as to suggest that they are definitely autobiographical. This is not the case with Part 1, which she refers to as “l’histoire d’amour chez une femme...”. Nevertheless, most critics assume that Part 1 is *either autobiographical or semi-autobiographical*.

relative past and present, concentrating on the principal female figures down the matriarchal line.

Part 4: “Le sang de l’écriture”, is Djébar’s response to the horror of modern-day Algeria.

I propose to relate the four parts of *Vaste est la prison* (introduced by a preface), corresponding to the four sections of this chapter, to Cixous’s ideas. I will look at the way both author and theorist relate to the problem of *écriture* and at the way they react not only against the opposition between the sexes, but against opposition in *language*. I will demonstrate how in both cases their reaction becomes a catalyst for a search for “another language”, one that they can call their own - in Cixous’s case, *une écriture féminine* and in Djébar’s case, *une écriture des femmes*.

The Preface

The problem of *écriture* - “Longtemps, j’ai cru qu’écrire c’était mourir”²⁰

Like Cixous, Djébar’s starting-point is the association of *language* with death, although her reasons for making the association are very different. In Djébar’s case, this association is not made because of the relationship between patriarchal thought and the construction of language, where “la mort est toujours à l’oeuvre”, but, as we will see, because of the relationship between what Lejeune calls “le présent de l’écriture” and “le passé raconté par l’écriture”.²¹

Cixous, like Djébar, uses the image of death in two ways in her “coming to writing”. She uses *écriture* as a means of resisting death, and evokes the death of the author as the prerequisite for the coming into being of *écriture*. Cixous first comes to writing as a means of resisting not only her own death, but also the death of the other: “Ma voix repousse la mort; ma mort; ta mort; ma voix est mon autre. J’écris et tu n’es pas mort. Si j’écris, l’autre est sauf.”²² In order to prevent the death of the other, in

²⁰ Assia Djébar, *Vaste est la prison* (Paris: Albin Michel 1995), p. 11.

²¹ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris: Seuil, 1975, p. 199.

²² Hélène Cixous (in collaboration with Annie Leclerc and Madeleine Gignon), *La Venue à l’écriture* (Paris:UGE, 10/18, 1977). p. 12.

order to write the other, the writer must die to the self: “ Et je dis: il faut avoir été aimée par la mort, pour naître et passer à l’écriture.”²³

Cixous, like Djébar, refers to silence, not as in Djébar’s case “le silence de l’écriture” but as the silence that precedes “l’écriture”, the silence that precedes voice, or the death that precedes life: “Quand la chair se taille, se tord, se déchire, se décompose, se relève, se fait femme nouvelle-née, il y a une souffrance qu’aucun texte n’est assez doux et puissant pour accompagner d’un chant. C’est pourquoi, pendant qu’elle se meurt, - puis se naît, silence.”²⁴ This silence that accompanies death is shattered by voice, by “le cri”: “Sans elle - ma mort - je n’aurais pas écrit. Pas déchiré le voile de ma gorge. Pas poussé le cri qui déchire les oreilles, qui fend les murs.”²⁵

In Djébar’s preface, writing remains in the deadening grip of the past, it does not undo the work of death but rather replicates it. The act of writing slowly saps away the lifeblood of existence: “Longtemps j’ai cru qu’écrire c’était mourir, mourir lentement”, the echoing effect of “longtemps” and “lentement”, the assonance in “écrire”, with the repeated “mourir”, mimicking the effect of a slow painful death (p. 11).

“Déplier à tâtons un linceul de sable ou de soie sur ce que l’on a connu piaffant, palpitant. L’éclat de rire - gelé. Le début de sanglot - pétrifié” (p. 11). The *différance* which marks Cixous’s writing relates to the continuous displacement of the signifier. The “difference” for Djébar relates to the displacement, between “le présent de l’écriture” and “le passé raconté par l’écriture”.²⁶ Here again there is a hierarchical opposition between terms, for the act of writing, “le présent de l’écriture”, inevitably destroys “le passé raconté par l’écriture”. So unlike Cixous’s writing which rejoices in an unfettered relationship with the present, Djébar’s writing exists within a rigid relationship to the past, a relationship which implies the subjugation of “le passé raconté par l’écriture” to “le présent de l’écriture”.

²³ Ibid. , p. 44.

²⁴ Ibid. , p. 42.

²⁵ Ibid. , p. 42.

²⁶ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 199.

Writing for Djébar occupies a site of uncertainty, conveyed by images of the blind groping for the past. Writing is the site of death - images of a shroud envelop the past, distorting its texture with its grainy film. The binding but destructive relationship between the present site of writing and the past recounted by the writing is intensified in the syntactical and phonetic parallelism. “L’éclat de rire - gelé. Le début d’un sanglot - pétrifié” (p. 11). The exuberance, vitality and movement of “piaffant, palpitant” contrasts with the coldness and inertia of “gelé, pétrifié”. Laughter and tears, life in all its fullness, emptied of life as the past, already dead to the present dies a second death, becomes dead to writing.

For Djébar, the act of writing represents not only the conflict between past and present, but also the conflict between her reluctance to write, on the one hand, and the compulsion to write on the other. The site waiting to be occupied by writing is an uncertain desert, a large empty space waiting to be enveloped in darkness, in death:

...au pied d’une dune friable, sous le ciel immense d’un soleil couchant.
Silence de l’écriture, vent du désert qui tourne sa meule inexorable, alors que
ma main court, que la langue du père (langue ailleurs muée en langue
paternelle) dénoue peu à peu, sûrement, les langes de l’amour mort... (p. 11)

The active/passive oppositional relationship is transferred onto the relationship between the active movement of writing and the literal passivity of the past. The past in the mind’s eye is darkened, its soundtrack silenced. Cixous also explores the relation between activity and passivity (in a productive rather than a destructive sense), as the writer consciously (actively) entreats herself to submit (passively) to the unconscious: “... c’est que la “venue” au langage, est une fusion, une coulée en fusion, s’il y a ‘intervention’ de ma part c’est dans une sorte de ‘position’, d’activité-passive comme si je m’incitais: “laisse-toi faire, laisse passer l’écriture...”²⁷

In the preface Djébar touches on Cixous’s “inclusive” view of writing, on the opening up of self to the other, in her capacity to propel her *écriture* beyond the

²⁷ Ibid. , p. 61.

repressive, self-referential viewpoint of the masculine. For Djébar, however, the experience of identification with others through writing, of the multiple subject, is painful rather than liberating: "... et le murmure affaibli des aïeules loin derrière, la plainte hululante des ombres voilées flottant à l'horizon, tant de voix s'éclaboussent dans un lent vertige de deuil - alors que ma main court..." (p. 11).

Emerging on the boundaries of the desert waste-land the voices of others, of "les aïeules", impose themselves with greater insistence onto the silence, "le murmure affaibli" becoming "la plainte hululante" and a chorus of voices "tant de voix s'éclaboussent dans un lent vertige de deuil", their slow, circular dance of death, "un lent vertige de deuil", mimicking the swirling movement of the khamsin, in a surreal vision of a procession of veils haunting the horizon. Writing as death is displaced by writing as escape from life: "Longtemps j'ai cru qu'écrire c'était s'enfuir, ou tout au moins se précipiter sous ce ciel immense, dans la poussière du chemin, au pied de la dune friable Longtemps" (pp. 11-12). The writing has gone full circle as the writer is propelled into the wide open site of writing, where each step forward is a step back into a past progressively shrouded in darkness, situating the writer in a position of uncertainty on the boundaries of past and present.

The problem of segregation - All in a word

From the problematics of writing, Djébar turns to the cutting edge of words. Djébar's relationship to one word in particular propels her closer to Cixous. For both of them recognise in this word the same process at work, the work of death. To her surprise and shock Djébar discovers the association of the Arabic word *e'dou* (which in normal usage means enemy) with the signified *husband*, and, as a result comes to acknowledge, like Cixous, that patriarchal language is a sexual battlefield. Whereas in *Vaste est la prison*, "le mari devient l'ennemi", in Cixous's work "l'ami est aussi l'ennemi"²⁸. For the process of death which Cixous associates with the hierarchical relationship between man and woman finds its echo in the process of destruction which Djébar associates with the segregating force at work within her society.

²⁸ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 137.

Djebar finds the process of segregation at work not only in society but also in language itself. Her association between social segregation and the construction of language occurs at a particular time and place and by a process of condensation “whereby one idea or image in the unconscious becomes a nodal point or intersection for a whole cluster of associated feelings, primal memories and desire”²⁹ This process of condensation is usually associated with dreams: “In this way, especially in dreams, a single image, word or sound can evoke through its compression a whole range of repressed wishes, emotion and thoughts.”³⁰

The catalyst for the moment of condensation is not a dream but an everyday encounter which takes place during a visit which Djebar makes to the local *hammam*, with her mother-in-law. The atmosphere of the baths is dreamlike - the luxuriant, fragrant surroundings representing an escape from the harsh realities of the outside world:

Le plaisir pour moi, comme beaucoup d'autres femmes, s'avivait à la sortie du bain. L'antichambre, tapissée de matelas, de nattes, où l'on vous servait à satiété oranges épluchées, grenades ouvertes et du sirop d'orgeat, devenait havre des délices. Les parfums se mêlaient au-dessus des corps des dormeuses, ou autour de celles qui, frémissantes, s'habillaient lentement tout en dévidant de menus commérages. (p. 12)

The moment of condensation takes place at the end of the visit, as her mother-in-law tries unsuccessfully to retain one of her friends :

Un jour, une dame opulente, la cinquantaine épanouie, les pommettes rosies de chaleur et le front auréolé d'une coiffe de taffetas blanc aux franges violacées, débita les longues formules des adieux.
Ma belle-mère, qui aimait sa compagnie, voulut la retenir.
- “Encore un quart d'heure, ô lumière de mon coeur!” insista-t-elle. (p. 13)

The friend's excuse puzzles Djebar:

- Certes, rétorqua la dame enveloppée de son voile immaculé et qui, pour finir, masqua tout à fait son visage dans un geste non dénué de hauteur, impossible de m'attarder aujourd'hui. L'ennemi est à la maison!
Elle sortit.

²⁹ Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 98.

³⁰ Ibid. , p. 98.

- "L'ennemi?" demandai-je, et je me tournai lentement vers ma belle-mère.
(p. 13)

The cosy atmosphere of the hammam is abruptly shattered by the word *e'dou* [enemy] as this signifier starts to resonate and move towards a new and threatening signified:

Ce mot, dans sa sonorité arabe, *l'e'dou*, avait écorché l'atmosphère environnante.

Ma compagne contempla, désespérée, le total étonnement qui emplissait mes yeux. Elle esquissa un sourire contraint; peut-être aussi ressentit-elle seulement en cet instant une sorte de honte.

- Oui "l'ennemi", murmura-t-elle. Ne sais-tu pas comment, dans notre ville, les femmes parlent entre elles? ... (Mon silence durait, chargé d'interrogation.) L'ennemi, eh bien, ne comprends-tu pas: elle a ainsi évoqué son mari! (pp. 13-14).

The moment of bewilderment is prolonged as the signifier *e'dou* hovers in space before acquiring its new signification:

- "Son mari l'ennemi? Elle ne semble pas si malheureuse!

Mon interlocutrice, sur le coup, parut agacée par ma candeur.

- Son mari, mais il est comme un autre mari!.... "L'ennemi" c'est une façon de dire! Je le répète: les femmes parlent ainsi entre elles depuis bien longtemps.... Sans qu'ils le sachent eux!... Moi, bien sûr. (p. 14)

Not only does the signifier *e'dou* acquire a new signified, but it acquires physical presence, becoming "torpille étrange", "flèche de silence":

Ce mot, *l'e'dou*, que je reçus ainsi dans la moiteur de ce vestibule d'où, y débouchant presque nues, les femmes sortaient enveloppées de pied en cap, ce mot d'"ennemi" proféré dans cette chaleur émolliente, entra en moi, torpille étrange; telle une flèche de silence qui transperça le fond de mon coeur trop tendre alors. En vérité, ce simple vocable, acerbe dans sa chair arabe, vrilla indéfiniment le fond de mon âme, et donc la source de mon écriture... (p. 14)

The warm stultifying cocoon of the surroundings is contrasted with the sudden, unexpected, propulsion and metallic hardness of "la torpille". Here Djébar does not enter into language, but language enters into her, and ironically, the silent arrow of language mutes the source of writing. The word literally becomes flesh "dans sa chair arabe", its signified changing course with dizzying speed, its poisoned tip

piercing her flesh. As the signifier *e'dou* experiences a displacement of signified, from husband to enemy, Djebbar realises that language itself is a battlefield and that the destructive force of segregation is at work in the structure of language itself:

Comme si, parce qu'une langue soudain en moi cognait l'autre, parce que la voix d'une femme, qui aurait pu être ma tante maternelle, venait secouer l'arbre de mon espérance obscure, ma quête muette de lumière et d'ombre basculait, exilée du rivage nourricier, orpheline. (p. 14)

Ironically it is the voice of a woman which drowns out the other voice, the primeval Mother/tongue voice, cutting her off from the nurturing mother-source, leaving her adrift. She is exiled from her mother-tongue, an orphan of language, deprived of the voice of the mother. She is adrift on foreign shores, bereft of hope, surrounded by people speaking a "foreign" language, a language from which she suddenly feels alienated, a language paralysed by tension, by "la désespérance depuis longtemps gelée entre les sexes" (p. 15).

"... la langue maternelle m'exhibait ses crocs" (p. 15). The maternal language, source of maternal riches, turns against her, betraying her trust, revealing its true nature, becoming threatening, violent, its bite, its divisive power, killing her hope "espoir obscur", inscribing in her "une fatale amertume" (p. 15).

Cixous also describes the feeling of being exiled from language, in the sense that she has been excluded from the masculine bastions of writing. But she also feels exiled from the French language in particular, in the sense that it is her second language (her first language being German) – French for her is literally "une langue étrangère". However, for Cixous this feeling of strangeness-in-the-foreign-language is translated into a positive force, which, as we will see, has the potential to open up creative possibilities.

Part 1 - The love story

Two endings, a beginning and a way out?

Whereas Cixous passes from her oppositional/dialectical couples to the fundamental male/female couples, Djebbar passes from her conception of opposition/segregation in

language to the story of the two “real life” couples (Isma/l’Aimé), (Isma/le mari), in Part 1. I will compare Cixous’s binary couples with each of Djébar’s real couples, in order to determine whether these couples conform to or subvert the oppositional framework in which relationships operate within patriarchy.

I will begin by examining *the final stage* of both relationships and will eventually project the two men involved into male roles identified by Cixous, “l’homme-ennemi” and “l’homme-Dieu”. Although Isma’s relationship with “le mari” is not initially conceived as oppositional, its ending places it comfortably within Cixous’s oppositional framework. Initially the relationship with “l’Aimé” also appears to fit equally comfortably within the patriarchal framework. For the opening chapter of the story, “la sieste”, (which by an act of chronological reversal describes the *ending* of the infatuation), clearly reveals “death” at work within the relationship.

In this review I would like to suggest that although the relationship with “l’Aimé” imprisons her within the same oppositional dynamics that she seeks to escape, the structure of the text releases her from those dynamics. For although the main body of the text describes her imprisonment within a male economy of relationships³¹, both the beginning and the end foreground her escape from that economy.

The first ending - end of the relationship with “le mari”

At first not much appears to separate “l’Aimé” from “le mari” - for he too is “l’ami”: “Je regardais l’époux ... Nous n’étions plus un couple, seulement deux anciens amis qui ne savent plus se parler” (p. 51). The relationship does not appear to be characterised by the battle for signifying supremacy, but more prosaically, by mutual indifference. But Isma’s husband, like Cixous’s “hommes”, eventually also crosses the enemy line:

Car dans le réel, c’est aussi maintenant en tant que femme que je suis offensée, et l’ennemi se généralise: contre moi, il n’y a pas seulement des adversaires de classe, les colonialistes, les racistes, les bourgeois, les antisémites. S’y ajoutent les “hommes”. Ou plutôt l’ennemi devient deux fois plus redoutable et plus haï. Mais le pire c’est que parmi mes frères, dans

³¹ Cixous makes a distinction between a male libidinal economy which is based on a return to the self or the selfsame, with a female libidinal economy which is traversed by the other.

mon propre camp imaginaire, se manifestent des agresseurs aussi bornés, grossiers, effrayants qu'en face. D'une certaine manière, je l'ai toujours sue, toujours vue, autour de moi, cette bestialité sexuelle, éclatante. Mais elle ne me devient intolérable que lorsque traversant mon propre corps, elle me blesse et m'entraîne en ce lieu de contradictions impossibles à surmonter, insolubles, dont je n'ai depuis jamais pu sortir: l'ami est aussi l'ennemi.³²

In *Vaste est la prison*, "le mari" has not always been "l'ennemi", but moves from a position of being "l'aimé" to becoming "l'ennemi", revealing himself to be an "agresseur borné". The catalyst for this transformation is Isma's impetuous revelation to her husband of her infatuation with the Other:

Je sais désormais que le besoin de parler - à un ami et donc, à défaut, à l'époux que je crus tout autant un ami, s'il n'était plus un amant - avivait le plaisir âcre de m'entendre, par là de me convaincre de la réalité de ce qui m'habitait, de lui donner du poids et de la chair. (p. 82)

"L'ami" becomes her enemy because she has broken the marriage taboo and refused his advances: "Tout en moi disait non" (p. 83). But, more significantly, she is no longer as Cixous puts it in "his parenthesis", her words are no longer an echo of his desire but an affirmation of her own desire, displacing him from the centre onto the sidelines:

... l'ami est aussi l'ennemi. Toutes les femmes ont vécu ça, le vivent, comme je continue à le vivre. "On" lutte ensemble, oui, mais qui: un homme, et à côté de lui, chose, quelqu'un - (une femme: toujours dans sa parenthèse, toujours refoulée ou annulée en tant que femme, tolérée en tant que non-femme, "acceptée"! - et vous n'en êtes pas conscients -, à condition qu'elle s'efface, qu'elle fasse l'homme, qu'elle parle l'homme et pense de même...).³³

Isma "parle l'homme", not in the sense that she denies her feminine subjectivity, but in the sense that she literally talks about her love for another man (the "wrong man" as far as her husband is concerned). By expressing her desire for this other man, she renounces the role of the silent companion and becomes a speaking, desiring subject in her own right: "Décidément je me comportai en hallucinée, ce soir-là. Je l'invitai à m'écouter, à vouloir, en une nuit, 'tout' dire... Le 'tout' devenait un poids de mes

³² Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 137.

rêves, de mes interdits, surtout de mon silencieux désir et par-dessus tout de mon besoin compulsif de le dire" (p. 82). By threatening "l'édifice masculin", by choosing to come out of the parenthesis, she becomes intolerable to him:

Il finit tout le whisky. Il se dressa. Il frappa. La large baie béante derrière nous (était-ce lui auparavant, je ne sais, qui l'ouvrit?) introduisait comme l'imminence d'un dangereux courant d'air qui, pensais-je, allait risquer de me précipiter, pour un rien, dans le puits de ces dix étages... Il frappa et je ne pouvais me réfugier vers le fond, comme si la baie ouverte faisait immédiatement appel; de ses bras d'homme grand et athlétique, il me saisisait aveuglément, il me lancerait pour que j'explose au-dehors. Il frappa et je glissai au sol, une prudence extraordinairement affûtée veillant en moi pour mesurer le risque moindre.... Il insulta auparavant. Il frappa ensuite. Protéger mes yeux. Car sa folie se révélait étrange: il prétendait m'aveugler. (pp. 84-85)

The relationship enters into the binary mode, the battle for signifying supremacy begins. As the enemy tries to ensure his victory by an act of violence, his words literally voice the work of death: "- Femme adultère", répéta t-il, ailleurs que dans cette ville de perdition, tu mériterais d'être lapidée!" (p. 85). The end of "l'amitié" with her husband is signaled by this act of violence. The end of her infatuation with l'Aimé, which opens the love story, is signaled by an act of awakening.

The Big Sleep or the second ending

The end of her infatuation, which appears to place the relationship with "l'Aimé" in the same oppositional framework of that of "le mari", will be examined in relation to Cixous's revision of Charles Perrault's archetypal fairy-story, "la Belle au bois dormant". Djebbar subverts the love-story to reveal a death-story:

Il était une fois ... et encore une fois
Les belles dorment dans leurs bois, en attendant que les princes viennent les réveiller. Dans leurs lits, dans leurs cercueils de verre, dans leurs forêts d'enfance comme des mortes. Belles, mais passives; donc désirables: d'elles émane tout mystère. Ce sont les hommes qui aiment jouer à la poupée. Comme on le sait depuis Pygmalion. Leur vieux rêve: être dieu la mère. La meilleure mère, la deuxième, celle qui donne la deuxième naissance. Elle dort, elle est intacte, éternelle, absolument impuissante.³⁴

³³ Ibid. , p. 137.

³⁴ Ibid. , p. 120.

Cixous's "belles" exist only as objects of desire, they are petrified into a permanent state of waiting, a state of immobility which Cixous equates with sleep and, by extension, with death. Perrault's handsome prince becomes a divine Pygmalion, a saviour and father-figure rolled into one. Cixous takes the divine imagery further however, identifying the deity with a female, rather than male saviour – "dieu la mère". The female saviour gives birth to her child, Pygmalion brings his statue to life, man gives birth to woman as patriarchal relationships are revealed to mimic the ultimate power relationship: that of creator and creation.

Cixous however begins the story with its ending. Her ending presumes an eventual awakening (for some) from the sleep of death, transforming the fairy story into an ideological diatribe, a tale of feminist conversion:

Il était une fois...

De l'histoire qui suit on ne peut encore dire: "ce n'est qu'une histoire". Ce conte reste vrai aujourd'hui. La plupart des femmes qui sont réveillées se souviennent d'avoir dormi, d'avoir été endormies.³⁵

Djebar, like Cixous, begins the love story with its ending, with the moment of awakening, the moment of knowledge, of "réveil", implying a *sortie* from the sleep of death, a release from prison, a conversion experience. In Isma's story, she emerges from a "sleep" of thirteen months, cured of her infatuation, "le coeur effacé". This "songe" is comparable to Cixous's "big sleep". But ironically, in Isma's case, the awakening from the "songe", from the long sleep of death, takes the form of a different kind of sleep, "la sieste": "Une sieste, une longue sieste, un jour de début novembre. Comme si ce repos venait après six, neuf mois, non, un an ou plus exactement treize mois, d'imbibition..." (p. 19)

In Isma's account of her awakening, she is liberated from the grip of an all consuming passion. The "songe" from which she awakes is not immediately equated with death, but with illness. Both her "songe" and her "réveil" are described in physical terms ("... elle matérialise charnellement ce qu'elle pense, elle le signifie

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 119-20.

avec son corps”³⁶). But before the awakening, the power of the mounting tides of passion is contrasted with her body’s powerlessness in resisting them:

... flux insidieux avec des latences, la montée intérieure enfle, houle en vibrations imperceptibles, en picotements, des répit intervient, des éclaircies de langueur, un soudain soleil d’hiver gicle dans le cœur, à nouveau la fièvre reprend, son grignotement qui n’en peut mais, son relâchement des muscles qui ahanent... et les refus farouches de je ne sais quoi, les frémissements réprimés, un labour obscur en moi, ce durcissement ne triomphe en rien de la marée impérieuse, doucement violente, obstinée, dessin en creux d’une passion infiltrée, anonyme... (p. 19)

Isma not only materialises what she thinks with her body, she also represses her feelings with her body: “... un masque, c’est cela, j’ai maintenant héroïquement le masque, mes mots sont voilés, mes rires, s’ils ne sont pas faux, s’ils ne craignent pas de zigzaguer, je les fais fuser plus haut, sur un rai de lumière lointaine, contre les brisants de dialogues éparpillés...” (p. 19). The mask shields her inner life, which becomes her “real world”, as the outside world and her outer self, her body, recedes: “Oui, après l’ensevelissement de tout ce qui s’exhume profond en moi, ténèbre d’un tumulte englouti derrière la civilité, derrière l’activité quotidienne et les allées et venues de mon corps absent...” (p. 19).

Before the awakening, Isma is detached from the real world around her, functioning only in relation to “l’Aimé” but the act of writing allows her to reverse the power dynamics - her life/story was in his hands: now his life story is in hers. He exists within the boundaries of her text:

Si la femme a toujours fonctionné “dans” le discours de l’homme, signifiant toujours renvoyé à l’adverse signifiant qui en annihile l’énergie spécifique [in Isma’s case literally producing “le relâchement des muscles qui ahanent”, p. 19] ... *il est temps qu’elle disloque ce “dans”, qu’elle l’explose, le retourne et s’en saisisse, qu’elle le fasse sien, le comprenant, le prenant dans sa bouche à elles, que de ses dents à elles elle lui morde la langue, qu’elle s’invente une langue pour lui rentrer dedans.*³⁷

³⁶ Ibid. , p. 170.

³⁷ Ibid. , pp. 176-77. [My emphasis]

This dislocation happens on a literary level, in the “prise de pouvoir” represented by the act of writing itself, but also on a literal level, where she describes her “réveil” which catapults her “dehors”, outside his “emprise”. She moves from a level of consciousness “dans” to another level of consciousness “dehors”: “...depuis ce réveil de l’après-midi, je ne suis plus sous l’influence, je suis moi-même, pleine de vide, disponible et tranquille, affamée du dehors et sereine.” (p. 22). She has come out of “la prison”, escaped from “inside”, the spell has been broken, the image of “l’Aimé” then inscribed on her heart now blotted out. The sleepy daze of the newly-awakened woman is accompanied by the indefinable awareness of a new beginning:

Que se passe-t-il? Une seconde d’incertitude; la lumière qui traverse la fenêtre est différente: non pas affaiblie, autre. Je fais effort pour comprendre peu à peu, malaisément, puis avec certitude, que quelque chose de neuf et de vulnérable à la fois, un commencement de je ne sais quoi d’étrange - en couleur, en son, en parfum, comment isoler la sensation? - , que “cela” est en moi et cependant m’enveloppe. Je porte en moi un changement et j’en suis inondée. (p. 20)

Like a shining vision of truth, the revelation of new life comes in a flash of blinding light, bathing her surroundings in its glow: “Tout, autour de moi, les meubles, la bibliothèque rustique, la chambre blanche, tout apparaît irisé d’un éclairage vierge. Justement parce que en cet instant, je me sens nouvelle. Je découvre en moi une surprenante, une brusque reviviscence.” (p. 21). As her inner turmoil recedes, the material world (re)emerges and she basks in its physical presence: “Je ne fais pas de projet, je vais et je viens pour le plaisir de me mouvoir; je m’habille pour sentir, sous l’étoffe froide, mes jambes, mes bras, mes épaules, ma peau” (p. 21).

This *sortie* into the world is lived with all the joy of a rebirth, the joy of a newly-born woman. Like a new-born baby, she has to adjust to the new world which she suddenly discovers around her: “...j’écarter les yeux. Une béance de l’atmosphère se creuse autour de moi; je suis toujours assise, encore étourdie. La strie d’une poussière dorée scintille en biais devant les volets baissés. S’installe un gel concerté des choses” (p. 21). Like a newborn baby, she slowly starts to recognise sound, touch, movement and colour:

Tout ce temps, je ne peux oublier l'étrangeté, le miracle de mon réveil, dans la bibliothèque. J'apprends peu à peu à m'habiter, dans un début de stabilité paisible: l'épaisseur rassurante des autres réafflue, ainsi que le poids des choses que je vérifie lentement, comme si leur volume jusque-là faisait obstacle Entendre et se laisser porter par les écharpes de couleurs, les sursauts de voix proches, l'impétuosité dans le désordre et son jaillissement! (p. 22-23)

Unlike Cixous's passive sleeping beauties who resist the present (Cixous refers to this compulsion as "la résistance à ce temps actif"³⁸), Isma is no longer a prisoner of the past. No longer a passive victim of her emotions, she has been propelled into active time and has recovered a sense of self. She has been *born again*, enlightened, awakened from the sleep of death to a new awareness of self and of the world around her. In the light of this life-changing experience, the love story in *Vaste est la prison* can be viewed as belonging to "les autobiographies religieuses de la conversion" (borrowing from Lejeune's analysis of *Les Mots*).

So from *La Jeune Née* to Lejeune...

Conversion à rebours, ici, cela va sans dire. Mais peu importe. Le nouveau converti examine ses erreurs passées à la lumière des vérités qu'il a conquises. ... le livre est un règlement de comptes. Mais en même temps, c'est un plaidoyer invoquant les "circonstances atténuantes..."³⁹

As in *Les Mots*, the main body of the text (in Djébar's case, the main body of the love story) is cast in the light of the conversion experience, allowing the new "convert" to examine her "past mistakes" in the light of her subsequent enlightenment. Similarly, like Sartre, Djébar also invokes "attenuating circumstances" with regard to Isma's involvement with "l'Aimé". She does this not by appealing to outward circumstances, but by foregrounding the *inner compulsion* which motivated Isma's actions, namely the desire to find a relationship which defied the oppositional logistics of the segregated society she inhabited – a desire echoed by Cixous.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

³⁹ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 206.

Il doit y avoir des modes de relation hétérogènes à la tradition ordonnée par l'économie masculine. Je cherche donc, de façon pressante et plus angoissée, une scène où produirait un type d'échange qui serait différent, un désir tel qu'il ne serait pas complice de la vieille histoire de la mort.⁴⁰

A new beginning? - looking for a way out

L'Aimé - l'exception

Although the opening chapter "La Sieste" (or "Le Réveil") places the relationship within the traditional oppositional framework, the subsequent flashbacks suggest that she entered into the relationship in order to escape that very framework. Initially, this love story appears to subvert Cixous's universal death-story and to claim its place as the exception to the rule. For Cixous herself acknowledges that there are rare exceptions to the binary system in the shape of men and women who have refused to conform to the traditional code. Djébar's "Aimé" first appears to fit the part perfectly:

Il y a des *exceptions*. Il y en a toujours eu, ce sont ces êtres incertains, *poétiques*, qui ne se sont pas laissés réduire à l'état de mannequins codés par le refoulement impitoyable de la composante homosexuelle. Hommes ou femmes, êtres complexes, mobiles, ouverts. D'admettre la composante de l'autre sexe les rend à la fois beaucoup plus riches, plusieurs, forts et dans la mesure de cette mobilité, très fragiles.⁴¹

"L'Aimé" represents someone who does not conform to the pattern of masculinity prescribed by patriarchy, and by extension represents Isma's hope of finding a relationship which subverts this male economy. Djébar's description of Isma's first "close encounter" with him confirms this:

... cette face recelait une paix étrange, ce physique de jeune homme *frêle*, ce regard clair avec des lueurs d'acier le traversant quand il parlait de sa voix hachée de drogué (drogué de musique, ou de nostalgie, ou de haschisch), cet homme - pas encore la trentaine, l'ombre de son adolescence fêlée, de sa jeunesse froissée l'enrobant encore - portait au-devant moi son *secret*. ... *le saccage de cet homme, et l'absence et le rêve de l'absence...*

⁴⁰ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 143.

⁴¹ Ibid. , p. 153. [My emphasis]

Dans les bribes de cette confession, je compris que cet air tranquille si ouvertement vulnérable, mais fier, que cette volonté aiguisée dans ces traits trop fins, dans cette maigreur du corps, dans ce dédain de l'apparence et de la mise, tous ces signes aisément décelables pour moi cachaient l'autre fêlure, une précédente blessure, une souffrance pas tout à fait disparue. *Habitait en cette face la poésie*, la jeunesse aussi qui trop souvent est étrangère à la poésie ... (pp. 27-28) [My emphasis]

Djebar foregrounds those aspects of "l'Aimé", which subvert the traditional code - he does not conform to the macho masculine image of a fairy-tale prince - physically, he is slight and slim, with delicate features, and a sunken look. On an emotional level, he appears to be one of the complex beings to whom she refers, a man with an air of calm that hides a storm. And most strikingly, Djebar identifies him as "habit[ant] en face de la poésie". As a complex and poetic soul, "L'Aimé" can be identified with Cixous's "exceptions" (Il y a en a toujours eu, ce sont ces êtres incertains, poétiques...), one of a small group of individuals who, throughout history, defied the laws of patriarchy by accepting "la composante de l'autre sexe".⁴²

Looking for the perfect model

Like "la jeune née" who is looking for a home, a body she can slip into, Isma is looking for a mode of relationship she can enter into which defies the logistics of segregation and the politics of patriarchy. Isma's search for a relationship model can be related to Cixous's search for a female role/model: "J'ai beau sillonner les temps et les récits qui sont à ma portée, je ne trouve pas de femme en laquelle me glisser."⁴³

Like "la jeune née" who tries out various bodies, Isma tries out various ways of conceiving her relationship with "l'Aimé". He, the unnamed, is first christened "l'Aimé". This signified subsequently undergoes successive displacements as he becomes "l'ami d'enfance", "le cousin paternel", "le cousin maternel", as Isma tries to find a way of relating to him which escapes the dynamics of male/female opposition. These successive transformations represent the symptoms of Isma's displaced desire for a lost world beyond patriarchy, where men and women are not

⁴² Ibid., p. 153.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 142.

ruled by the laws of segregation. For Djebbar, like Cixous, is looking for “des modes de relation hétérogènes à la tradition ordonnée par l’économie masculine”.⁴⁴

One “model” which the relationship slips into is that of “l’ami d’enfance”. Isma is very conscious of their age difference, at times fantasising it away: “J’ai vraiment votre âge!”, while foregrounding his youthful appeal, “un sourire enfantin qu’ostensiblement il m’adressait” (p.29). During one of Isma’s impromptu visits to “L’Aimé’s” summer house, she highlights his youth once again: “sa beauté gardait le laisser-aller de l’adolescence” (p. 33). Isma playfully invites her “young” companion to a game of table tennis in the back garden, which soon resounds with the sound of their laughter, as the innocent pleasure of carefree childhood play contrasts with the intense desire for sexual fulfillment :

Encore à présent, me parvient l’éclat de nos rires, de ma joie bondissante, de ma vivacité.... Certes, dans la pénombre de la chambre, quelle opacité nous attendrait, des étreintes, des silences, deux corps se rapprochant, une tension de plus en plus nouée qui se délierait, qui céderait au fléchissement du cou, aux lèvres qui se cherchent, aux morsures qui s’esquissent, peut-être aux pleurs de délivrance s’il y a jouissance, y aura-t-il jouissance Tout à l’heure, un peu plus tard dans la chambre. (p. 34)

From sexual ecstasy to childhood innocence - the sudden realisation of this displacement of desire takes Isma by surprise: “‘Comme c’est bon l’enfance à deux!’, me suis-je soudain avoué, interloquée de ma découverte (du coup j’oublie de parer, je perds, fais semblant de le regretter, je suis si loin en arrière!). Ma surprise grandit: Vais-je revivre un passé englouti? Me trouver dans l’enfance avec toi? Est-ce cela tout le mystère?” (pp. 34 -35).

She is nostalgic, both literally and metaphorically, for a different age: “Je me crois âgée de six ans, de dix...” (p. 35), the golden age when the bar was not there, where the line that separated the binary oppositions, the wall of segregation was not yet erected, the time of innocent friendships: “tu es mon compagnon de jeu, ce jardin devient celui du village où j’ai vécu fillette...” (p. 35). But the Sign of Islam imprints itself even onto this flight into “imaginary” harmony. For the Islamic law of

⁴⁴ Ibid. , p. 143.

segregation applied to childhood friendships, and only a male cousin could escape its heavy hand: "Où j'aurais pu te rencontrer. Personne autour de nous, n'aurait trouvé à redire. Aurait-il fallu que tu sois un cousin, mieux, un cousin germain paternel? Il aurait fallu..."(p. 35).

For Islam celebrates the law of segregation/opposition as a "miracle", in which the opposition of man and woman takes centre stage:

Everything is double and that is the sign of the divine miracle. Bivalence is the will of God, and sexuality, which is the relating of male and female, is merely a particular case of an absolutely universal divine wish A view of the world based on bivalence and dual relations emerges from the Quran: opposition of contraries, alternation of the various, the coming into being of all things, love, causality, surrection and resurrection, order and call and, in the last analysis, prayer (*qanūt*) It is no accident that the quranic text is placed under the sign of the Sign and that the word *aya* should recur in it so frequently. This is because all signs (*aya*) taken together sing the praise of the Lord by describing the miracle of opposition and relation, order and call. It may even be said that sexuality, by virtue of the central, universal position it occupies in the process of renewal of creation, is a sign of signs, an '*ayat al-ayat*'".⁴⁵

"L'Aimé's" garden, suddenly transformed into her childhood garden, now becomes a pseudo-Eden: "... tout amour n'est-il pas retour au royaume premier, cet éden, puisque je n'avais pu autrefois le connaître (les interdits de mon éducation musulmane ayant fonctionné doublement), je le goûtais au cours de ces jeux, en ce début d'hiver" (p. 35). So Djébar redefines Isma's desire for "l'Aimé" in terms of the displaced desire for a lost Eden, a space beyond segregation, a time before men and women were separated by the laws of Islam.

Isma proceeds to another relationship model, this time associating "l'Aimé" with the image of a young cousin, combining the playfulness/mischief of childhood friendships with the intimacy of a family relationship. The context is now their shared workplace, where they make contact by telephone. Their phone calls are characterised by the exaggerated intimacy of the telephone medium and the thrill of a

⁴⁵ Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 7.

shared secret, recalling the innocent companionship of youth. This illusory intimacy prompts Isma to reveal to "l'Aimé" her visualisation of him as "le cousin paternel":

- ... Il me semblait tout à l'heure que, dans mon coin de la pièce assombrie, je chuchotais à l'adresse de mon cousin germain, à l'autre bout!
- Il murmura, amusé:
- Ainsi, je suis votre cousin germain! Bien content de cette alliance! (p. 41)

This projection is soon discarded in favour of that of "le cousin maternel", displacing the notion of marriage of convenience, "les mariages d'intérêts", associated with the marriage of paternal cousins, with that of disinterested love, associated with the relationship of maternal cousins:

- Vous seriez le fils de mon oncle paternel? ... Non ce n'est pas possible, je viens de rappeler que mon père est le seul fils, qu'il a perdu son frère adolescent, dans un accident d'autocar, il y a longtemps de cela! Vous seriez plutôt le fils de mon oncle maternel! Vous savez bien, la branche paternelle compte pour l'héritage, et donc pour les mariages d'intérêts, tandis que la ligne maternelle, par contre, est celle de la tendresse, des sentiments, de...
- J'allais ajouter "de l'amour"... (p. 41)

Djebar moves from a conception of the relationship based on "l'héritage", "intérêt", property, to one based on "l'amour", loving, giving, symbolising a transition from Cixous's Realm of the *Proper* to her Realm of The *Gift*. The notion of the paternal cousin is no longer acceptable because of its association with what Cixous terms "L'Empire du Propre", the masculine value system, based on a practice of returns: "Revenir": l'économie est fondée sur quelque chose qui s'appelle le revenu. Si un homme dépense, s'est à condition que ça revienne."⁴⁶

The masculine law of return orders the Islamic⁴⁷ marriage system, assuring the return of property to (or the preserving of property within) the paternal family. In this sense it can be regarded as a form of self-preservation, whose root-cause is identified by Cixous as fear: "L'Empire du Propre, la culture fonctionne à l'appropriation qui est articulée, agie par la crainte de l'homme classique, de se voir exproprié..."⁴⁸ By

⁴⁶ Hélène Cixous, "le sexe ou la tête?", *Les Cahiers du GRIF*, 13 (1976), pp.5-15, p.11.

⁴⁷ Marriages between cousins are still relatively common in the Arab world, and have not acquired the connotations of Western taboos on the subject.

⁴⁸ Hélène Cixous, "le sexe ou la tête?", p. 11.

contrast, the relationship of maternal cousins, like the Realm of the *Gift*, is free from self-interest:

Elle aussi donne pour. Elle aussi donnant se donne - plaisir, bonheur, valeur augmentée, image rehaussée d'elle-même. Mais ne cherche pas "à rentrer dans ses frais." Elle peut ne pas revenir à elle, ne se posant jamais, se répandant, allant partout à l'autre. Elle ne fuit pas l'extrême; n'est pas l'être-de-la-fin (du but); mais de la portée S'il y a un "propre" de la femme, c'est paradoxalement sa capacité de se dé -proprier sans calcul...⁴⁹

By associating Isma's relationship with disinterested love, with the Realm of the *Gift*, Djebbar is attempting to visualise it in terms which defy the implacable masculine law of return. This represents yet another attempt to find "des modes de relation" which defies the masculine economy of relationships.

In Isma's account of her first social encounters with "l'Aimé", she again identifies her desire to escape from that economy. At that time, they both "hung out" with a group of journalists, and she describes her integration into the group as her initiation into "une bande". The group of men is dubbed "mousquetaires", with Isma as "le quatrième mousquetaire". The relationships are characterised by the banter, drinking, teasing and cliquishness, in-jokes of a "bande d'ados". But Isma soon identifies her desire to be part of this group as a displacement of a deeper desire: "Ce n'était pas pour moi un besoin de groupe; plutôt une nostalgie pour moi, de cet âge perdu: de n'avoir pas eu de camarades garçons, des connivences légères, gratuites, avec l'autre sexe... Vingt ans après, je supprimais enfin le tabou, la ségrégation..." (p. 53)

Although Isma's image of her relationship to "l'Aimé" changes, as she projects various labels onto him (childhood friend, adolescent companion, maternal cousin), her aim in each case is the same, to escape, to eliminate the power-dynamics of segregation. The concept of desire itself is continuously displaced from the particular to the general, from a notion of individual pleasure (her desire for "l'Aimé") to the desire for an idealised state of relations outside the prison house of

⁴⁹ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, pp. 161-62.

patriarchy (her desire for a lost Eden) and, although she does not achieve this on the level of the relationship itself, she later achieves this at the level of *écriture*.

Reversing the roles : retaining the power-dynamics – “L’homme-Dieu”

As “l’Aimé” undergoes various transformations in Isma’s imagination, the relationship takes on a life of its own. Not only does Isma project labels onto him, but she projects thoughts into his mind, and puts words into his mouth. One reason for this is “l’Aimé’s” inherent passivity. He takes little initiative either in speech or in conversation. His lack of agency, and natural reticence in speech creates a zone of ambiguity, silence and inertia, which Isma interprets at will:

Je sais qu’il s’étonne, en ce moment, que, au cours de toute la soirée, ainsi que durant notre station devant le crépuscule sur la plage, “rien, finalement, ne se soit passé entre nous!”

Se dit-il vraiment ces mots ordinaires? Ou simplement en a-t-il la pensée abstraite, je le sens confusément à son regard quelque peu amusé posé sur moi avec indulgence, et une tendresse diffuse - celle-ci n’ayant rien à voir avec la moire de mon trouble que je parviens à dissimuler. (p. 91)

Isma analyses her relationship with “l’Aimé” in terms of rhythm and dance, of passions which are choreographed differently. But hers is a solo performance: “allées et venues de ma danse fantasque autour de lui, de sa maison, de ses jours de halte et de paresse” (p. 91). His dance does not have a slower rhythm, it has no rhythm at all - it is as if he slowly sways and reels from the energy of her dance, as if he is not even on the dance floor, but in the audience a spectator, watching her dance, watching and waiting, as her mind reads his silent gaze:

... lui, je comprends en cet instant de l’au revoir, envahi avec nonchalance par ce qui s’esquisse entre nous .. lui, en somme, avec passivité, se mettant à m’attendre: “Quand finiras-tu par t’approcher vraiment? J’ai voulu évacuer la houle d’autrefois, te dévoiler l’histoire qui est mienne, c’était pour te dire: l’ivresse, la passion, chacun les vit à son tour, chacun en est broyé malgré soi - chacun et donc toi! Laisse-toi aller! Viens, viens doucement! Je ne t’appelle pas je ne te presse pas; seulement, je t’attends! (p. 91)

It is “l’Aimé” who is cast in the waiting role, as Cixous’s “belle” becomes “le beau”: “*Le beau* dort dans son bois, en attendant que *la princesse* vient le réveiller. Beau, mais *passif*; donc désirable; de lui émane tout mystère.” If “l’Aimé” is the passive

half of the relationship, then Isma is the agent. Her agency is evident in both speech and action. In speech it manifests itself in the constant use of the imperative, reinforcing the fact that not only their meetings, but also the thrust of their conversations take place at her initiative.

“Vous êtes seul? aurais-je demandé.

-Oui!

-Bavardons!”. (p. 38)

Their summer trysts are again at her initiative - she goes to find him: “Il y eut donc ces deux ou trois journées où, descendant de voiture, je trouvai cet homme seul” (p. 32). However, despite this reversal of active/passive roles, *the power-dynamics remain the same as in Cixous’s revised story*.⁵⁰ For it is Isma who succumbs to “l’Aimé’s” spell, and “l’Aimé” who has power over her. “L’Aimé” comes to assume one of the roles which Cixous identifies for man, not “l’homme-ennemi”, but “l’homme-Dieu”, “L’Aimé” whose child-like smile is described as “l’offrande royale” (p. 29). It is Isma who falls into the trap of instituting man as God, who buys into the dream of the mysterious man-God: “Il faut dire qu’il y a toujours eu un dieu ou un autre, embusqué au bon endroit, avec son allure rassurante d’énigme personnifiée.”⁵¹

Like Cixous’s man-God, “L’Aimé” retains an aura of mystery, remains an enigma: “cet homme ... portait au-devant de moi son secret ... le saccage de cet homme, et l’absence et le rêve de l’absence...” (p. 27). This absence creates an empty zone onto which Isma projects all her hopes and dreams. While pointing out the mortal danger of this type of wish-fulfilment, Cixous demonstrates the lengths to which woman will go to keep believing in the dream, the dream of salvation through man:

Oui, pendant la moitié du chemin de ta vie, tu as prouvé tous les jours qu’il y avait du vrai dans cette conception. Non sans mal. Que de difficultés tu as eues à rendre vraie au moins personnellement cette “vérité”! Les paniques, les affres, chaque fois qu’une source a séché; chaque fois qu’un dieu t’a

⁵⁰ In the context of the binary oppositions, Cixous encourages woman to resist the passive stereotype. In the context of *écriture*, however, passivity, in the sense of the passive submission to the unconscious is encouraged (see *La Venue à l’écriture* p. 61).

⁵¹ Hélène Cixous, *La* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 255.

confié que, fatigué de nourrir, il se voyait obligé de t'avouer à quel point il était capable de mortalité.⁵²

Before the revelation of "l'Aimé's" mortality, Isma endures "the anguish, the panics" of the source drying up, of "l'Aimé's" absence from her life. His absence then casts her in the waiting role, so that she becomes a passive, languishing "female", in other words, another "Molly":

"Bridebed, childbed, bed of death": lit de nocces, lit d'accouchée, lit de mort c'est le trajet de la femme qui s'inscrit ainsi de lit en lit dans *l'Ulysse* de Joyce... lit de Molly épouse, adultère, cadre d'une infinie rêverie érotique, périple des réminiscences. Elle erre, mais couchée. En rêve. Rumine. Se parle à elle-même. Voyage de la femme: en tant que *corps*. Comme si, séparée de l'extérieur où se font les échanges culturels, à l'écart de la scène sociale où il s'agit de l'Histoire, elle était destinée à être, dans le partage que les hommes instituent, la moitié non-sociale, non-politique, non-humaine dans la structure vivante, côté nature bien sûr, à l'écoute inlassable de ce qui se passe à l'intérieur, de son ventre, de sa "maison". En rapport immédiat avec ses appétits, ses affects.⁵³

The bed of death magnetically attracts not only Molly but all women: "La femme, si on la cherche, on a de fortes chances de la trouver toujours dans la même position, c'est-à-dire au lit."⁵⁴ Isma too is living in waiting mode. She too lies on the bed of death, sapped of her energies, separated from the outside world, locked in the world of inner torment:

Dans ma demeure le lendemain, allongée et inactive, tant la souffrance de l'absence me rongait - comme j'aurais souhaité, à la place, subir un mal de dents sournois ou me paralysant la face de son intensité, au moins bénéficieraient-je d'une anesthésie -, je ne me sentais plus assez forte pour me tenir simplement debout. Pourrais-je aller le lendemain à mes cours? ... Je finissais par me traîner dans l'appartement vide: le temps se suspendait comme au théâtre, au nom d'une fatalité a priori décrétée. (p. 75)

However the spell is broken when "l'Aimé" reveals his mortality. He is not a God, but a man, not even a man, a child. The event which crystallises these thoughts is the final confrontation between "l'Aimé" and "le mari". The turning-point, the moment of no-return comes when Isma finally realises that he, "l'Aimé", will never save her.

⁵² Ibid., p. 253.

⁵³ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 121.

⁵⁴ Hélène Cixous, "le sexe ou la tête?", p. 6.

This change of heart is provoked not by his physical weakness in the face of her husband's defiance, but by the revelation of his moral weakness. It is the sight of his back, turning away from him, turning away from her, that constitutes the moment of awakening, of elucidation, the moment of condensation: "Ensuite j'ai fixé son dos. Je veux dire: le dos de celui qui m'occupait l'âme, qui me griffait le coeur depuis des mois et des mois. Le dos fuyant" (pp. 102-03). This act of cowardice strikes at her inner being, where a voice, an inner voice takes over: "Ainsi continuai-je à voir ce dos, après qu'il eut disparu. Une voix en moi, blanche: 'J'ai aimé un enfant, un adolescent, un jeune frère, un cousin, pas un homme. Je ne le savais pas encore' "(p. 103). The God is revealed to be mortal: the man is revealed to be a child.

Again the passivity of the real "Aimé" is contrasted with his fantasy-counterpart, who like "le prince des bois", would have confronted her husband and carried her away. But even as he withdraws from her, Isma does not want to believe the truth - the truth that he is not a God, the truth that he will not and does not want to save her, echoing Cixous's theory that women do not learn from previous experiences, and have great difficulty in abandoning their faith in the man-God:

Quelles frayeurs alors! Changer d'urgence de source! Courir brancher ta vie à une source plus intarissable! voilà à quoi tu étais contrainte, en dépit donc de la raison, pour n'être pas conduite à te mourir, à trahir ta croyance, ton "essence"; à t'abandonner à personne d'autre qu'à toi.

A te voir condamnée à l'invivable alternative: ou courir de lieu d'une source coupée à un autre lieu, où il n'y a pas encore de source, et ainsi d'espoir en espoir, courir, courir, croire, croire, espérer, fabriquer en sillonnant l'espace des trances de croyance, d'espoir, de source, qu'en repassant tu pends toi-même pour le signe qu'il y en a, qu'il y en a eu, qu'il y en aura, que tu es l'erreur, et que la vérité t'attend avec une patience inusable quelque part en personne⁵⁵

Here too Isma has the urge, not to run to a new source, but back to the old source, in desperate hope that she can go away, run away with him, be saved together from reality. In the absence of his initiative, Isma's imaginary screenplay rolls into action. But even in this imaginary construction she is the one who would have led him away, who would have taken the initiative:

⁵⁵ Hélène Cixous, *La*, pp. 253-54.

- Il n'a pas affronté - reprend la voix - même pas pour moi! Il aurait pu se tourner vers moi. Devant l'époux qui cherchait le duel dérisoire, j'aurais tranché en un éclair: je serais allée vers toi, toi, l'Aimé de mon coeur, je serais allée vers ton hésitation et même ton effroi, devant tous je t'aurais tendu la main. "Sortons! Partons!" aurais-je décidé.

Lui, le jeune homme pas tout à fait homme, aurait trouvé le courage. Nous serions partis devant les criailleries, les insultes, le silence des autres Moi avec le vaincu. Résolue. Moi partant avec celui qui recevrait les horions. De l'époux et des autres." (pp. 103-04)

The experience returns her to the bed of death: "Une heure après, je m'écroulais dans la chambre de ma fille; seule. Sur le matelas, à même le sol. Je ne quittais plus cette place. Une journée; peut-être deux. Je gisais. Je fixais devant moi le dos de l'Aimé - et je me disais 'autrefois l'Aimé', puisque j'avais vu son dos"(p. 104).

Rather than finding a mode of relations which defies the male economy, Isma is imprisoned first within her marriage, and then by her infatuation, locked in a power-struggle, where he is always the victor, and she is always the loser. The man-enemy has been displaced by the man-God. She has been doubly overpowered, first by violence and then by infatuation. Can Isma find a way out for herself, a means of empowering the overpowered?

Towards the final "sortie"

Si la femme a toujours fonctionné "*dans*" le discours de l'homme ... *il est temps qu'elle disloque ce "dans", qu'elle l'explose, le retourne et s'en saisisse, qu'elle le fasse sien*, le comprenant, le prenant dans sa bouche à elles, que de ses dents à elles elle lui morde la langue, qu'elle s'invente une langue pour lui rentrer dedans.⁵⁶

In the final chapter of the love-story Djébar perpetrates a reversal in her conceptualisation of the power-dynamics of Isma's relationship with "l'Aimé". She not only dislocates herself from his magnetic field, so that she is no longer *in* "l'Aimé's" power, but goes further, reversing the dynamics, so that *he* is viewed in relation to *her*. Because this symbolic reversal means that *she* rather than *he* takes on the dominant role, it does not destroy but merely replicates the male/female paradigm in its opposite form. However, in the closing paragraphs of Part 1, Djébar moves

⁵⁶ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, pp. 176-77.

from this position of *female dominance*, within a “female economy of relationships”, to a final position mimicking a *bisexual economy*, where self and other reach a position of fluid interchangeability.

Reversing the power-dynamics - retaining the paradigm

Isma's final meeting with “l’Aimé” is presented as magical, as having been orchestrated by an outside force: “Avec l’Aimé - enfin, ‘l’autrefois aimé’ -, une autre rencontre eut lieu. Sur une scène vaste: comme si notre face-à-face avait été l’objet de préparations secrètes ordonnancées par un magicien” (p. 114). She meets him at the railway station, on the very day of his return from a year of “co-opération” abroad: “Je crus au miracle d’un ordonnateur invisible, pour nous deux, une ultime fois, convoqué” (p. 115).

In this finale of the relationship, it first appears that “l’Aimé” is reinstated in her emotions: “A mi-chemin de ce trajet, je le reconnus: lui, l’Aimé avec passion, ‘l’Aimé’ pensai-je, et non ‘l’autrefois aimé’ ” (p. 115). The situation has changed. He looks different: “Je l’examinai calmement: son visage avait grossi: ses joues étaient hâlées. Il avait forci: ses épaules semblaient plus larges” (p. 115). But more significantly than the difference in his outward appearance is the shift in her conceptualisation of the relationship, as a female deity rises out of the ashes of the discredited male God and woman gives birth to man:

Mais je le sentis soudain - à moins que je ne le comprisse plutôt en le quittant-, mon coeur s’emplissait d’un attendrissement véritablement maternel: il était devenu un homme vigoureux et séduisant! ... “Je l’aime, me dis-je, comme une jeune mère! Comme si, bien qu’il fût loin de moi, j’avais contribué à le transformer, à l’amener à cet état de maturité! (p. 116)

Images of Pygmalion bringing Galatea to life, of Perrault’s prince kissing life into the princess, of man, “dieu la mère”, giving birth to his creation, woman, all dissolve - as Galatea, the princess and the newly born child take power into their own hands. It is Isma who is now taking on the role of “dieu la mère”, looking on benevolently at the child-man she helped to “create”.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ibid. , p. 120.

“Sorties” - Escaping the paradigm - opening the prison door...

The text comes full circle. “Je reviens à ces jours d’avant la sieste, à ces treize mois: je ne sais pas pourquoi avec tant de circonvolutions, en désordre volontairement non chronologique, j’ai fait égoutter ces fontaines de moi-même, alors qu’il fallait les tarir, ou au moins les endiguer” (p. 116). Isma’s conception of “l’Aimé” also goes full circle, as the man-child she has begotten becomes part of her, in images displacing the intensity of labour with the intimacy of sexuality:

Et cet homme, ni étranger ni en moi, comme soudain enfanté, quoique adulte, de moi, soudain moi tremblant contre sa poitrine, moi pelotonnée entre sa chemise et sa peau, moi tout entière contre le profil de son visage tanné par le soleil, moi sa voix vibrante dans mon cou, moi ses doigts contre ma joue, moi regardée par lui et aussitôt après, allant me contempler pour me voir par ses yeux dans le miroir, tenter de surprendre le visage qu’il venait de voir, comment il le voyait, ce “moi” étranger et autre, devenant pour la première fois à cet instant même, précisément grâce à cette translation de la vision de l’autre. (p. 116)

It is as if this fantastic coalescence finally achieves the bisexuality of Cixous, the co-existence of same and other, “ce ‘moi’ étranger et autre, devenant pour la première fois moi à cet instant même, précisément grâce à cette translation de la vision de l’autre.” As Isma and “l’Aimé” come together in a dynamised finale, Cixous’s vision of *écriture* harmonises with Djébar’s vision of desire:

Admettre qu’écrire [que le désir] c’est justement travailler (dans) l’entre, interroger le procès du même *et* de l’autre sans lequel rien ne vit, défaire le travail de la mort, c’est d’abord vouloir le deux, et les deux, l’ensemble de l’un et de l’autre non pas figés dans des séquences de lutte et d’expulsion ou autre mise à mort, mais dynamisés à l’infini par un incessant échangeant...⁵⁸

This magical harmonised relation of self and other, is displaced onto the ultimate image of proximity, self next to other:

Lui ni étranger ni en moi, mais si près, le plus près possible de moi, sans me frôler, voulant pourtant m’atteindre et risquant de me toucher, l’homme me devenait le plus proche parent, il s’installait dans la vacance originelle, celle que les femmes de la tribu avaient saccagée autour de moi, dès mon enfance

⁵⁸ Hélène Cixous, ‘Le Rire de la Méduse’, *l’Arc*, 61, pp. 39-54. p. 46. [My addition]

et avant ma nubilité, tandis que s'esquissait le premier pas de ma vacillante liberté. (pp. 116-117)

This image of proximity suggests a move towards a site beyond desire, and a return to the theme of segregation. He is no longer a physical part of her, but is physically related to her. The relationship is now that of "le plus proche parent", now devoid of desire, occupying the emptiness caused by the ravages of segregation, creating a site beyond patriarchy, a place where man and woman are eternally related but not bound to each other, where they are finally released from *la vaste prison*.

Part 2 - *Ecriture des femmes/Ecriture féminine*

The love story of Part 1 is displaced in Part 2 by a historical narrative centred on the Berber script, which has also been referred to as "une écriture des femmes".⁵⁹ Having rejected patriarchal language because of its oppositionary/segregating properties, both Cixous and Djébar turn to another language - Cixous explores *une écriture féminine* whereas Djébar reappropriates *une écriture des femmes*.

In this section I will compare two very different forms of *écriture*, one a writing practice, the other the written form of a "specific" language, Berber, and assess whether Djébar's *écriture des femmes*, like Cixous's *écriture féminine*, represents *une sortie* from the patriarchal prison-house of language.

In comparing the two *écritures*, I suggest that despite their fundamental differences, there are also distant echoes to be heard between them.

Proliferation of languages

Both *écritures* can be located at the locus of the repressed. In Djébar's case, the repression of the Berber language is represented by absence or erasure, by "l'effacement", "l'effacement sur la pierre".⁶⁰ The Berber writing has been erased not only from the stone but also from historical memory. The stone refers to a historical monument, a stela located at Dougga, on the Algerian-Tunisian border,

⁵⁹ Lise Gauvin, "Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien", p. 76. While it is Gauvin who coins the phrase, Djébar's reply confirms her interpretation.

which was discovered and rediscovered at various points during the 17th and 18th centuries, by Western travellers and archaeologists. These explorers (all male) either fail to identify the script at all or identify it incorrectly. This writing is eventually revealed to be “une écriture libyque”, another term for the Berber script (also referred to as tifinagh), still used today by the Touareg tribe. But why the Berber language? Djebbar explains:

Parce qu’il y a trois langues dans la culture algérienne. Il y a l’arabe depuis quatorze siècles avec sa diglossie, avec son aspect populaire et son aspect littéraire Une nation, c’est tout un faisceau de langues et cela est vrai plus particulièrement pour l’Algérie. En dehors de ce territoire de l’arabe, il y a donc la langue berbère qui était la langue de ma grand-mère mais dans mon adolescence j’étais persuadée que c’était une langue orale, qu’elle n’avait pas d’alphabet.⁶¹

Strangely enough Cixous and Djebbar share the same experience with their mother and grandmother tongues respectively, namely the belief that these languages did not exist in written form: “Effroi le jour tardif où j’ai découvert que l’allemand, ça s’écrit ... Tenter de faire de la langue primitive, de la chair du souffle, une langue-objet. Ma lalemande!”⁶²

Cixous also writes about being caught not *between* but *with* three languages [languages], the subject in this case being herself (as opposed to the nation!) as she puts in an appearance at the doctor’s complaining of a sore throat, which is preventing her from writing:

- Alors, me dit le docteur, on veut écrire?
- Un peu mal à la gorge, dis-je, angineuse d’épouvante...
- Ouvrez la bouche, montrez ça.
J’ouvre la bouche, je fais Ach, je tire la langue. J’en ai trois. Trois langues?⁶³

Why three “languages”? Cixous is also caught between three languages, French, German and English⁶⁴, but here she is also making a humorous point about a serious

⁶⁰ “L’effacement sur la pierre” is the title of Part 2.

⁶¹ Lise Gauvin, “Assia Djebbar, Territoires des langues: entretien”, p. 74.

⁶² Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l’écriture*, p. 29.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 38-39.

issue, that of woman's "mutism". Woman has been forced to hold her tongue (in): "Ne lui dis pas, ne lui dis pas. Il te coupera les langues..."⁶⁵ But inside her mouth the tongues (languages) proliferate, and we return to the theme of repression. The more these "languages" are repressed, the more they abound or multiply: "Et encore il ne sait pas que j'en ai une ou deux qui ne sont pas accrochées là, mais peut-être une seule mais changeante et multipliante."⁶⁶

In her journey towards writing, Cixous dares to open her mouth, to stick out her multiple tongue(s), and to write the world with the contours of her now cosmic organ: "Les eaux du monde s'écoulent de mes yeux, je lave mes peuples dans mon désespoir, je les baigne, je les lèche avec mon amour..."⁶⁷ The writing practice which Cixous develops counters woman's learned instinct to hold (the tongue) in: "Car, à une 'femme', toute empreinte par l'héritage socio-culturel, on a inculqué l'esprit de 'retenue'".⁶⁸ Cixous encourages if not implores the writer not to hold back but to let go: "Lâche-toi! Lâche tout! Perds tout! ... La condition à laquelle commencer à écrire devient nécessaire -(et)- possible: *tout perdre*, avoir une fois tout perdu."⁶⁹

Cixous's *écriture féminine* also engages with the locus of the repressed, in the sense that it obeys the call to let go, to abandon the illusion of conscious intellectual control, and to open itself up to the unconscious as the site of "that which has been repressed by the brutal severing of the corporeal and the linguistic, and by the processes of sexual differentiation."⁷⁰ By letting go of her conscious self, and delving into her other, her unconscious, the writer is free to travel into the realms of the Imaginary. Unfettered by the self-referential boundaries of the symbolic world, she can roam into the limitless world of (the)other(s): "...c'est pourquoi je suis

⁶⁴ Hélène Cixous wrote her doctoral thesis on James Joyce and has been a Professor of English Literature since 1968.

⁶⁵ Ibid. , p. 39.

⁶⁶ Ibid. , p. 39.

⁶⁷ Ibid. , p. 53.

⁶⁸ Ibid. , p. 45.

⁶⁹ Ibid. , pp. 46, 44.

⁷⁰ Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous, A Politics of Writing* (London and New York: Routledge 1991), p. 70.

partout, mon ventre cosmique, je travaille mon inconscient mondial..."⁷¹, before returning to inscribe her experiences into symbolic language. She has no permanent abode either in the Symbolic or in the Imaginary but rather occupies a space in-between the two realms, a boundary line which liberates a third perspective, a third body: "... il nous vient un *Troisième Corps*, une troisième vue, et nos autres oreilles, - entre nos deux corps notre troisième corps surgit, vole et va voir plus haut le sommet des choses ... mais pour que s'écrive le troisième corps il faut que l'extérieur entre et que l'intérieur s'ouvre."⁷²

Looking forwards , Looking back

One of the most fundamental ways in which *une écriture féminine* and *l'écriture des femmes* differ is in their relation to time. Djébar looks back in time to locate her *écriture des femmes* whereas Cixous looks both to the future ("Je parlerai de l'écriture féminine: de ce qu'elle fera."⁷³) and to the past:

Je dis qu'il faut: puisqu'il n'y a pas eu encore, à quelques rares exceptions près, d'écriture qui inscrive de la féminité. Si rares, qu'on ne peut en sillonnant les littératures à travers temps, langues et cultures, revenir qu'effrayé de cette presque vaine battue; on sait que le nombre de femmes écrivains, (tout en ayant augmenté très peu à partir du XIXe siècle), a toujours été dérisoire. Savoir inutile et leurrant si de cette espèce d'écrivantes on ne déduit pas d'abord l'immense majorité dont la facture ne se distingue en rien de l'écriture masculine.⁷⁴

In a footnote to this paragraph Cixous clarifies that she is referring here exclusively to western culture "Je ne parle ici que de la place 'réservée' à la femme par le monde occidental." Back in the oriental world, Djébar is looking to the ancient past to locate her *écriture des femmes*:

A.D. -...L'alphabet berbère, l'alphabet libyque est un des plus anciens de la terre. Il est aussi ancien au moins que l'alphabet étrusque; or c'est comme si on se mettait à entendre l'alphabet étrusque. Pourquoi et à quel moment cet alphabet s'est retrouvé être le patrimoine des Touaregs et de leurs femmes essentiellement? Il y a en moi un questionnement, mais par le rêve. Ce qui m'amène à...

⁷¹ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 53.

⁷² Ibid. , pp. 58-59.

⁷³ Hélène Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse", p. 39.

⁷⁴ Ibid. , pp. 41-42. In a footnote to this paragraph Cixous lists Colette, Marguerite Duras and Jean Genet as the only twentieth century writers whose writing she regards as inscribed by femininity.

L.G.-...une littérature de femmes, une écriture des femmes?

A.D.- Dans la société touareg, ce sont les femmes qui conservent l'écriture...⁷⁵

On a psychoanalytical level, these two *écritures* also occupy very different loci. Cixous's *écriture* is located on the boundaries of the conscious and the unconscious, in-between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, whereas Djébar's *écriture* appears to be located firmly in historic/symbolic time. Despite these differences I would like to suggest that the starting-point of both authors' journeys, of both their "venues à l'écriture" is the same, that they both come to writing from the same point of departure, because of a feeling of *exclusion*.

Starting-point exclusion

This feeling of exclusion in language is what drives both authors to look for an/other *écriture*. Cixous uses religious imagery to express her feelings of exclusion or alienation in language. Language is the realm of the divine and *écriture* is God, a male God at whose altar only a male élite can worship. Afraid to approach the throne of grace, woman accepts her relegation to obscurity with all the fatalism of the impoverished masses: "Ecrire? Je n'y pensai pas. J'y songeai sans cesse, mais avec le chagrin et l'humilité, la résignation, l'innocence des pauvres. L'Ecriture est Dieu. Mais ce n'est pas le tien."⁷⁶

Woman is allowed to look but not to touch, to read but not to write. Writing is God and whereas the woman who reads is already transgressing His Law, the woman who writes commits the ultimate sacrilege:

Mais écrire? De quel droit? Après tout, je les lisais sans droit, sans permission, à leur insu.

Comme j'aurais pu prier dans une cathédrale, et envoyer à leur Dieu un message imposteur.⁷⁷

If writing is God, the great I am, the one and only Truth, Cixous wonders who is woman ("J'étais personne") to presume to make herself equal with God? ("Je

⁷⁵ Lise Gauvin, "Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien", p. 76.

⁷⁶ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 19.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

suis”...: qui oserait parler comme dieu? Pas je...”⁷⁸ Cixous is outside the sacred law, prevented from writing for multiple reasons - historical, personal, racial, sexual - as well as linguistic:

Tout de moi se liguait pour m’interdire l’écriture: L’Histoire, mon histoire, mon origine, mon genre. Tout ce qui constituait mon moi social, culturel. A commencer par le nécessaire, qui me faisait défaut, la matière dans laquelle l’écriture se taille, d’où elle s’arrache: la langue.⁷⁹

Language, and the French language in particular, erects its barriers against her, refusing to let her enter the holy of holies, its site of *écriture*: “J’ai dit ‘écrire français’. On écrit *en*. Pénétration. Porte. Frappez avant d’entrer. Formellement interdit.”⁸⁰

Cixous contrasts this prohibitive relationship to the French language with her positive relationship to German, her maternal language. This language which she experiences as *voix* and not *écriture* holds no such barriers, but rather opens its flood-gates, letting in *la mère*: “J’ai eu cette chance, d’être la fille de la voix Dans la langue que je parle, vibre la langue maternelle, langue de ma mère, moins langue que musique, moins syntaxe que chant de mots, beau Hochdeutsch...”⁸¹

But there are two sides to Cixous’s relation to the French language. As we have seen, she has been exiled from it because of her status as a woman, but she is also a stranger to it because of her status as a “foreigner” (since German is her mother-tongue). But rather than reacting negatively to this “strangeness” in language, Cixous embraces the distance between her and the French language as opening up creative possibilities:

C’est elle [l’allemand] qui me rend la langue française toujours étrangère. A elle, mon indomptée, je dois de n’avoir jamais eu avec aucune langue un rapport de maîtrise, de propriété ... d’avoir toujours voulu m’approcher délicatement de toute langue, jamais mienne, pour la lécher, la humer, adorer ses différences, respecter ses dons, ses talents, ses mouvements. Surtout la garder en l’ailleurs qui la porte, laisser intacte son étrangeté.... Si tu ne

⁷⁸ Ibid. , pp. 23, 24.

⁷⁹ Ibid. , p. 20.

⁸⁰ Ibid. , p. 20.

⁸¹ Ibid. , pp. 28-29.

possèdes pas une langue tu peux être possédée par elle: Fais que la langue te reste étrangère. Aime-la comme ta prochaine.⁸²

Djebar, on the other hand, is ambiguous about her position as “étrangère” to the French language, which for her is both physically liberating and emotionally destructive. Growing up in Algeria, she is the only Arab female child in the area to be educated in French (thanks to the influence of her schoolteacher-father) and this experience exiles her from her compatriots. She is rejected by them because she has entered into forbidden and dangerous territory. She has dared to push open “The Door”, leading to the site of learning reserved for man. And because she has transgressed this unwritten law, she is exiled by those around her: “Dès le premier jour où une fillette “sort” pour apprendre l’alphabet, les voisins prennent le regard matois de ceux qui s’apitoient, dix, quinze ans à l’avance: sur le père audacieux, sur le frère inconséquent. Le malheur fondra immanquablement sur eux.”⁸³

Despite the social exile, the French language brings liberation, not a creative openness (as in Cixous’s case), but a physical release. In *L’Amour, la fantasia* this sense of exhilarating physical freedom brought to her by the French language, of a door opening onto the outside world, is conveyed by the association of language and the power of sight, both given and withdrawn:

Comme si soudain la langue française avait des yeux, et qu’elle me les ait donnés pour voir dans la liberté, comme si la langue française aveuglait les mâles voyeurs de mon clan et qu’à ce prix, je puisse circuler, dégringoler toutes les rues, annexer le dehors pour mes compagnes cloîtrées, pour mes aïeules mortes bien avant le tombeau.⁸⁴

Cixous uses her idea of *écriture féminine* to challenge the dichotomy of mind and body. By engaging with the unconscious, she unsettles the illusion of conscious control which upholds intellectual mastery at the expense of erasing the body. In contrast, in *L’Amour, la fantasia* Djebar asserts the dichotomy of body and soul when describing her relationship to the French language. French frees the body but imprisons the soul. Ironically here it is the paternal language, French, rather than the

⁸² Ibid., p. 29.

⁸³ Assia Djebar, *L’Amour, la fantasia* (Casablanca, Editions EDDIF 1992), p. 15.

maternal language, Arabic, which is associated with bodily freedom. This bodily freedom is nevertheless contrasted with a sense of emotional detachment and alienation which the French language also brings.

So whereas, for Cixous, the “strangeness” of the French language liberates creative possibilities, for Djébar its “strangeness” merely creates emotional blockage. In *L'Amour la fantasia* this was described as emotional aphasia, as an inability to express love: “Je ne pouvais dire le moindre mot de tendresse ou d'amour dans cette langue...”⁸⁵ In this novel, the counterpoint to French, the “alien” paternal language, is the maternal language, Arabic, which at this stage is still regarded as the language of love. Here Djébar's yearning for Arabic is expressed in terms of a longing for the Voice of the Mother, in language reminiscent of Cixous's “bon lait de mère”:

En fait je cherche, comme un lait dont on m'aurait autrefois écartée, la pléthore amoureuse de la langue de ma mère. Contre la ségrégation de mon héritage, le mot plein de l'amour-au-présent me devient une parade d'hirondelle.”⁸⁶

In *Vaste est la prison*, the opposition between French (as the language of absence - in the sense of *geographical* absence - and of alienation) and Arabic (as the language of presence and pleasure) abruptly breaks down, as the Arabic language reveals its true colours: “La langue maternelle m'exhibait ses crocs” (p. 15). Djébar becomes an orphan of language, with no maternal or paternal language in which to feel at home. The Arabic language no longer represents *protection* from the segregation at work in her society but is now associated with the very process of segregation. The image of the swallow's flight in *L'Amour, la fantasia* is displaced in *Vaste est la prison* by the winging arrow of segregation piercing her flesh, as the opposition between French and Arabic is displaced by a new opposition, that of Arabic and Berber.

⁸⁴ Ibid. , p. 208.

⁸⁵ Lise Gauvin, “Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien”, p. 79.

⁸⁶ Assia Djébar, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, p. 80.

Écriture matriarchale-Écriture Matricielle

In the preface of *Vaste est la prison*, Djébar rejects Arabic as a patriarchal language, and in Part 2 of the novel she turns instead to a “matriarchal language”, an *écriture* which belongs to a matriarchal society:

Dans la société touareg, ce sont les femmes qui conservent l'écriture. C'est une société matriarcale, c'est-à-dire que les femmes étant au centre, l'ascendance noble passe par les femmes. On y devient “amenokal” par la lignée des femmes.⁸⁷

This language not only belongs to a matriarchal society, but in a sense also belongs to her: “...il y a donc la langue berbère qui était la langue de ma grand-mère.”⁸⁸ Cixous, like Djébar, also wants to find a language that belongs to her, a writing practice in which she feels at home and which escapes the traps of patriarchal language. She comes up with the idea of an *écriture féminine*, a writing practice which undermines patriarchal language by *exceeding* it, rather than setting itself up in opposition to it. Djébar thus rejects patriarchal language in favour of a *matriarchal language*, whereas Cixous exceeds patriarchal language with “une *écriture matricielle*”:

Femmes pour femmes: en la femme toujours se maintient la force productive de l'autre, en particulier de l'autre femme. En elle, matricielle, berceuse-donneuse, elle-même sa mère et son enfant, elle-même sa fille-soeur.⁸⁹

Matriarchy is defined as “a social organisation in which the mother is head of family and descent is reckoned through female line.”[OED]. Cixous's *matricial* writing is also centred on the status of the mother, not in her position as the head of the family but in her childbearing role. She explores a writing practice linked to what she calls the female libidinal economy or “le libido de l'autre”⁹⁰ related to woman's capacity to *give birth*: “Il y a un lien entre l'économie libidinale de la femme - sa jouissance,

⁸⁷ Djébar, quoted in Lise Gauvin, “Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien”, p. 76.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 74.

⁸⁹ Hélène Cixous, “Le Rire de la Méduse”, p. 44.

⁹⁰ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 169.

l'imaginaire féminin - et sa façon de se constituer une subjectivité se divisant sans regret..."⁹¹

The feminine libidinal economy offers the possibility of an alternative relation to the other, based on woman's experience of childbirth. The process of *giving* birth is associated with the concept of giving in the sense of a gift, and of giving up in the sense of relinquishing without regret. The bonding between mother and child represents a relation to the other which is not oppressive or repressive but literally and metaphorically life-giving:

Il ne s'agit pas seulement de cette ressource supplémentaire du corps féminin, de ce pouvoir spécifique de la production du vivant dont sa chair est le lieu, pas seulement d'une transformation de rythmes, des échanges, du rapport à l'espace, de tout système de perception... Mais aussi de l'expérience du "lien" à l'autre, tout ce qui passe par la métaphore de la mise au monde.⁹²

Whereas the female libidinal economy favours a positive bond with the other, the masculine libidinal economy is incapable of a relationship with the other, occupying as it does a self-referential position which tends towards the obliteration of the other. Because a feminine subject position has this privileged position toward the other, Cixous believes that feminine writing will bring alternative positions of relation and therefore of expression. Like the female libidinal economy, feminine writing offers a passage-way to a new relation between self and other in which both coexist: "L'écriture, c'est en moi le passage, entrée, sortie, séjour, de l'autre que je suis et ne suis pas, que je ne sais pas être, mais que je sens passer, qui me fais vivre..."⁹³

Cixous links the feminine capacity for a positive relation to the other first of all to childbirth, with woman's capacity to *give* birth, and secondly to woman's generosity, with her ability to *give*. She then relates this capacity to give "endlessly", to woman's sexuality, to her endless body. Woman's ability to give is contrasted with man's fear of letting go of himself, with his compulsion to return to the "Selfsame". In the context of desire, of exchange, man cannot *give* of himself without thought of return (to the selfsame), but only gives what he can be assured of

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 167.

⁹² Ibid., pp. 166-67.

getting back. Women on the other hand, give without thought of return: "S'il ya un "propre" de la femme, c'est paradoxalement sa capacité de se déproprier sans calcul..."⁹⁴

This capacity to give endlessly is linked to woman's "endless body, without end". Sexual difference is no longer reduced to the visual (absence or presence of the male "attribute") but identified with the indefinable capacity for sexual pleasure or *jouissance*. By redirecting the definition of sexual difference to the level of the unseen, to the libido, Cixous reaffirms a positive female sexuality, as the opposition between male presence and female absence is displaced by the difference between female plurality and male limitation. For Cixous contrasts woman's endless "cosmic" libido to man's "regionalised" masculine sexuality, and then links this "endlessness" to writing: "Sa libido est cosmique, comme son inconscient est mondial: son écriture ne peut aussi que se poursuivre..."⁹⁵ Her writing goes on and on into the inside place: "Elle seule ose et veut connaître du dedans, dont elle, l'exclue n'a pas cessé d'entendre résonner l'avant-langage", a place beyond the Symbolic, where she can draw on the rhythms and articulations of the mother's body.⁹⁶

Écriture as resistance

Apart from the role of the mother which is central to both *écritures*, there are other distant echoes between *une écriture féminine* and *l'écriture des femmes*. Both *écritures* occupy a site of resistance, one challenging the colonial order, the other challenging the symbolic order.

From the beginning Djébar foregrounds her *écriture* as mysterious and strange: "une inscription bilingue dont le mystère dormira encore deux siècles" (p. 128), "l'alphabet étrange garde son mystère" (p. 132). This mysterious writing will not submit to the desire of the male European enquirers to grasp its significance, despite their persistent curiosity: "Devant la stèle de Dougga, à la frontière algéro-tunisienne,

⁹³ *La Jeune Née*, p. 158.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-63.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

j'ai essayé de ressusciter tous les voyageurs qui sont passés devant et se sont demandé: "Qu'est-ce que cette écriture mystérieuse?"⁹⁷ This male quest echoes Cixous's phrase "masculine interrogation": "Dès qu'on *pose* une question, dès qu'on *demande* une réponse, eh bien *on est déjà pris dans l'interrogation masculine*."⁹⁸

The masculine interrogation in Djébar's historical narrative is both persistent and misguided, as each of the travellers, and the academics whom they consult, come to their erroneous conclusions about the nature of this mysterious script. Their task is made more difficult by the initial false assumption that they make, namely that they are dealing with a "dead language": "Et les savants, dans leurs cabinets, de chercher, d'étudier, d'ausculter, de supposer..., croyant toujours aller à la quête d'un sens perdu, d'échos souterrains" (p. 145). In this male assumption that this *écriture des femmes* (which is alive in myriad voices around them) is dead, there is a distant echo of Cixous's observations on men being deaf to the female voice: "... sa parole choit presque toujours dans la sourde oreille masculine, qui n'entend dans la langue que ce qui parle au masculin."⁹⁹

Each of the Western sojourners in turn fails to recognise the nature of "les signes mystérieux" (p. 127) which they come across, as one false interpretation is displaced by the next - "antique égyptien" (p. 127), "punico-ibérico" (p. 131), "un vieil africain" (p. 135). The mysterious signs are elusive, the signifiers stubbornly refuse to yield their meanings to the Western gaze. This *écriture des femmes* refuses to be known, to be possessed, refuses to submit to the coloniser's desire. There is a certain irony in the fact that this *écriture des femmes* cannot be grasped by men. To use Cixous's phrase, this writing exceeds their understanding, their grasp. It exceeds their understanding because they cannot make the connection between *écriture* and *voix*, whereas, as we will see, Cixous's *écriture féminine* exceeds the thought-processes of patriarchy *because* of its connection of *écriture* and *voix*.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 162.

⁹⁷ Lise Gauvin, "Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien", p. 76.

⁹⁸ Hélène Cixous, "le sexe ou la tête", *Les Cahiers du GRIF*, 13, pp. 5-15, p. 7.

⁹⁹ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 171.

Cixous's *écriture* also demonstrates resistance, in this case against the symbolic order. First and foremost, it resists the symbolic at its most fundamental level of meaning, that of separation. Cixous first comes to writing as a means of confronting separation in the form of death (the death of her father) : "Ecrire : pour ne pas laisser la place au mort, pour faire reculer l'oubli, pour ne jamais se laisser surprendre par l'abîme. Pour ne jamais se résigner, se consoler, se retourner dans son lit vers le mur et se rendormir comme si rien n'était arrivé; rien ne pouvait arriver."¹⁰⁰

Writing resists death because it takes on the infiniteness and the immortality of the divine. It "steals" the attributes of God, becoming the ultimate source of goodness and of love, as the image of "la Parole de Dieu" shedding His blood for the world is displaced by "la parole du sang" which shares itself with all others "dans le sang-rapport":

J'ai peut-être écrit pour voir; pour avoir ce que je n'aurais jamais eu ... Avoir? Un avoir sans limites, sans restriction; mais sans aucun "dépôt", un avoir qui ne détient pas, qui ne possède pas, l'avoir-amour, celui que se soutient d'aimer, dans le sang-rapport. Ainsi, donne-toi ce que tu voudrais que dieu-s'il-existait te donne L'écriture est bonne: elle est ce qui n'en finit pas. En moi circule le plus simple, le plus sûr autre. Comme le sang: on n'en manque pas. Il peut s'appauvrir. Mais tu le fabriques et tu le renouvèles. En moi la parole du sang, qui ne cessera pas avant ma fin.¹⁰¹

This new form of shared identity "dans le sang-rapport" allows the writer to journey beyond herself to a limitless space of shared unconsciousness, a space of "shared unconscious patterns and forms, which are the product of shared histories worked out across shared bodies."¹⁰²

Language as a weapon of war

By engaging with the unconscious, woman liberates not only her writing, but also her self, and as such writing becomes an agent for social change: "... l'écriture est la possibilité même du changement, l'espace d'où peut s'élancer une pensée subversive, le mouvement avant-coureur d'une transformation des structures sociales et

¹⁰⁰ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. , p. 12.

¹⁰² Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous, A Politics of Writing*, p. 26.

culturelles.¹⁰³ *L'écriture féminine* does not express itself as the voice of political opposition but as the mouthpiece of a resistance movement. In her mind's eye Cixous stages the return of the repressed as the newly-empowered agents of "la Résistance" rise up : " 'Le Refoulé' de leur culture et de leur société, quand il revient c'est d'un retour explosif, *absolument* ruinant, renversant, d'une force encore jamais libérée, à la mesure de la plus formidable des répressions..."¹⁰⁴

This active resistance to the Symbolic contrasts with the writer's passive submission to the Imaginary: "... je ne barre pas, je ne ferme pas mes terres, mes sens, l'espace charnel qui s'étend derrière mes yeux: je me laisse traverser, imprégner, affecter..."¹⁰⁵ And it is because *l'écriture féminine* draws its inspiration from beyond the Symbolic (although it is materially inscribed in symbolic language) that it is resistant to symbolic thought-processes:

Impossible de *définir* une pratique féminine de l'écriture, d'une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais *théoriser* cette pratique, l'enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle n'existe pas. Mais elle excédera toujours le discours que régit le système phallogénique...¹⁰⁶

The subversiveness of Cixous's *écriture* used as a revolutionary weapon finds its echo in Djébar's story of the way the Berber language was used as a secret weapon in the context of war, not against the patriarchal order, but against the colonial system. Before the fall of Constantine at the hands of the French army in 1837, Hamdane Khodja, a prominent Algerian official, tries unsuccessfully to get the Turks to come to the aid of its ruler, the bey Ahmed. After the fall of Constantine, Khodja's son turns up in Paris and meets up with a French orientalist, De Saulcy, to whom he hands over some letters he has in his possession. These letters, items of correspondence between the bey and Hamdane Khodja, are mostly in Arabic, but also contain a mysterious script, which De Saulcy eventually discovers to be the Berber language:

¹⁰³ Hélène Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse", p. 42.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁰⁵ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁶ Hélène Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse", p. 45.

Soudain le Français comprend: et si le bey Ahmed, parlant évidemment le berbère chaoui, ayant appris à Constantine, grâce à des nomades sahariens de passage, cette écriture du secret, l'utilisait comme code: considérant que cet alphabet, devenu si rare, peut seul parer au danger de l'interception. (148)

The subversive script is thus used as a secret code, as a way of avoiding the detection of the enemy. Although Cixous makes it clear that her *écriture* cannot be coded, it too is resistant, and, like Djébar's *écriture des femmes*, is used to destabilise the prevailing order.

Écriture and Voix

Although Cixous makes it clear that *une écriture féminine* cannot be defined, she does nevertheless ascribe to it a "proximity to voice". The central irony of Djébar's narrative also lies in the proximity of *écriture* and voice - in this case the Berber voices are literally present in the areas surrounding the *écriture* on the stone. For the whole parade of academics, researchers, archaeologists who survey this *écriture* are blind to the fact that *écriture* is alive, that this *écriture* which they cannot grasp is being spoken all around them. Djébar visualises it coming to life before their very eyes, becoming voice, presence, cry and song: "Si cette écriture étrange s'animait, se chargeait d'une voix au présent, s'épelaient à voix haute, se chantait?" (p. 145).

This writing on the stone comes alive, swirling around the sojourners, circling around in space and after finding its way into the desert-land, stretches out geographically, and stretches back pre-historically to find form in dancing signs:

Or l'écriture vivait; or ses sonorités, sa musique, son rythme se dévidaient autour d'eux, autour des voyageurs, leurs émules, circulant entre Dougga et Cirta, et jusque dans Constantine prise, et sur les montagnes kabyles insoumises quinze ans après Constantine puis, au-delà des dunes et des sables sahariens, jusqu'au coeur du désert même! Car là, depuis le Fezzan jusqu'en Mauritanie, parmi les nomades ayant cru oublier les Numides, les lettres libyques d'antan se sont glissées subrepticement dès l'époque peut-être des Garamantes - qui perdaient leurs chevaux pour des chameaux nouvellement introduits, qui laissaient disparaître de leur terre les troupes d'autruches dont ne resteraient, en foule dansante et mobile, que les silhouettes gravées sur les parois des cavernes millénaires" (p. 146).

It is as if Djébar wants to trace this writing as far back into the past as possible - it is its anteriority, its ancient origins which give it its specificity. Djébar wants to restore the Berber script to historical memory, and in particular to foreground its “qualities”, its capacity to survive, its affinity with women and its mobility, not in terms of “migrations de mots” but in terms of *migration de langues*¹⁰⁷, creating not *une écriture plurielle* but “une écriture polygame” (p. 158):

Si ce supposé “dialecte” d’hommes qui parlèrent tour à tour punique avec Carthage, latin avec les Romains et les romanisés jusqu’à Augustin, et grec puis arabe treize siècles durant, et qu’ils continuèrent, génération après génération, à garder vivace pour un usage endogamique (avec leurs mères, leurs épouses et leurs filles essentiellement), si ce parler remontait jusqu’à plus loin encore? Cette langue, celle de Jugurtha exprimant son énergie indomptable à combattre et à mourir, celle-là même de Masinissa tout au long de ses soixante ans de règne! Si, plus arrière encore, les Barbares/Berbères, hôtes et quelquefois amis ou rivaux des grands Pharaons...” (p. 145)

Djébar wants to trace her *écriture* back as far as possible to its most ancient of *origins*, as if wishing to confer onto it a sense of historical authority. Although Cixous relates her *écriture féminine* to voice and to the Voice of the Mother in particular, she on the other hand refuses the concept of origin, of the Voice-as-origin, and opts instead for the idea of writing as a journey into the unknown, towards a second innocence, which resonates with, rather than originates from, the primeval Mother-song: “Pas l’origine: elle n’y revient pas. Trajet du garçon: retour au pays natal, *Heimweh* dont parle Freud, nostalgie que fait de l’homme un être qui a tendance à revenir au point de départ, afin de se l’approprier et d’y mourir. Trajet de la fille: plus loin, à l’inconnu, à inventer”.¹⁰⁸

As in Djébar’s narrative, Cixous makes an association between writing and voice: “La féminité dans l’écriture je la sens passer d’abord par: un privilège de la voix...”¹⁰⁹ Cixous gives “voice” to her *écriture* because of the proximity of voice to the unconscious and to song.

¹⁰⁷ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l’écriture*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 173.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 170.

According to Cixous, a woman's voice or speech is closer to the *unconscious* than is her writing. In speech a woman involuntarily reveals what patriarchal culture has taught her to repress - her body (Cixous gives the example of a woman's *body* language when she is engaged in public speaking: "Ecoute parler une femme dans une assemblée....: elle ne 'parle' pas, elle lance dans l'air son corps tremblant..."¹¹⁰). A woman's thoughts are literally revealed in body/language: "elle matérialise charnellement ce qu'elle pense".¹¹¹ Thus although a woman represses her body in writing, she cannot do so in her speech. By privileging the voice in her *écriture*, Cixous thus reappropriates the body into writing.

The privileging of voice allows proximity not only to the unconscious but also to song, to the "associative logic of music over the linear logic of philosophical and literary discourse".¹¹² The logical progression of "la syntaxe... ce fameux fil"¹¹³ is subverted by the associative powers of "le chant", the echo of the primeval song: "La Voix, chant d'avant la loi, avant que le souffle soit coupé par le symbolique, réapproprié dans le langage sous l'autorité séparante. La plus profonde, la plus ancienne et adorable visitation. Et chaque femme chante le premier amour sans nom."¹¹⁴ And, as the rhythms of The Song are inscribed into symbolic language, the Law of the Father is transgressed by the Voice of the Mother:

... c'est, te touchant, l'équivoque qui t'affecte, te pousse depuis ton sein à venir au langage, qui lance *ta* force; c'est le rythme qui te rit; l'intime destinataire qui rend possible et désirable toutes les métaphores, corps (le? les?), pas plus descriptible que dieu, l'âme ou l'Autre; la partie de toi qui entre toi t'espace et te pousse à inscrire dans la langue ton style de femme. Voix: le lait intarissable. Elle est retrouvée. La mère perdue. L'éternité: c'est la voix mêlée avec le lait.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Ibid. , p. 170. Cixous proceeds to point out why this is more likely to apply to women than to men: "Comment ce rapport privilégié à la voix? Parce que aucune femme n'empile autant de défenses anti-pulsionnelles qu'un homme." (p. 173).

¹¹¹ Ibid. , p. 170.

¹¹² Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous, A Politics of Writing*, p. 22.

¹¹³ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 177.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. , p. 172.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. , pp. 172-73.

Writing as preservation - historiography and mythography.

In writing, Cixous sees the possibility of change, and this is especially true of her staging of history, where she focuses on moments of crisis which carry within them the possibility of change.¹¹⁶ Her interest in writing and staging history is also linked to “a more general project of protecting that which is threatened with effacement, and of restoring historical memory.”¹¹⁷ Djébar, like Cixous, uses writing as a site of preservation, and, again like Cixous, is caught between historiography and mythography, as the story of Tin Hinan will illustrate.

By the act of writing “L’effacement sur la pierre”, Djébar protects the Berber script and Berber heroes, such as Jugurtha and Tin Hinan, from effacement. The main section of Part 2 is built around the reconstruction of historical facts. Although Djébar takes some liberty with chronological linearity, she retains clear historical markers and references, and as such her writing remains within a symbolic temporal framework. However, in the final chapter of Part 2, which deals with the Princess Tin Hinan, Djébar goes beyond the historical world, as if obeying Cixous’s call not to be limited by the constraints of symbolic time and space, but to tune her ears to an inner voice: “... il faut que l’extérieur entre et que l’intérieur s’ouvre.”¹¹⁸

So with the story of Tin Hinan, the internal world opens up as Djébar goes to Cixous’s School of Dreams: “J’ai rêvé la-dessus. J’ai rêvé sur une princesse, la princesse Tin-Hinan, dont on a retrouvé le sanctuaire en 1925 et dont le corps a été transporté à Alger dans un musée.”¹¹⁹ Tin Hinan is a fourth century Touareg princess who flees her native northern territory to settle in Abalessa, where she is eventually buried with two female companions. In the course of the twentieth century her mausoleum is discovered in Alabessa and her remains taken to the museum in Cairo.

¹¹⁶ Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous, A Politics of Writing*, p. 107.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. , p. 130. Quotation taken from Véronique Hotte, “Entretien avec Hélène Cixous”, *Théâtre/Public*, 68 (1986), pp. 22-29.

¹¹⁸ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l’écriture*, p. 59.

¹¹⁹ Lise Gauvin, “Assia Djébar, Territoires des langues: entretien”, p. 76.

Cixous tells us that “[i]n order to go to the School of Dreams something must be displaced, starting with the bed”.¹²⁰ In Djebbar’s case, what is displaced? Not the bed, although that is where the dream starts: “*Je rêve, décidément, à ce jour où Tin Hinan fut couchée à Abalessa: on l’étendit sur un lit en bois sculpté. Son corps mince, recouvert d’étoffes et de larges ornements de cuir, fut allongé sur le dos, orienté vers l’est, bras et jambes légèrement repliés*” (p. 163). In her dream, Djebbar displaces historiography with mythography, returning us to a question raised by Cixous’s historical novels: “... if it is a fiction, to what extent does its factual accuracy matter? If is a history, can it also, productively, be a myth?”¹²¹

In Djebbar’s case, it is a history which is also productively a myth. The essentials of the story depend on historical fact, which validate the anteriority of the Berber language, while the mythological element diverges from historical records to *produce* an eternal home for her *écriture des femmes*, ensuring that it remains forever in the hands of woman and in the heart of Africa.

The result of this combination of history and myth comes close to becoming what Cixous refers to as “[c]et être d’air et de chair qui s’est composé en moi avec des milliers d’éléments de significations arrachés aux divers domaines du réel et liés ensemble par mes émotions, ma rage ma joie mon désir...”¹²² For in this final chapter Djebbar links together “des éléments de significations arrachés aux divers domaines du réel” in the sense that she brings together the various strands of her historical narrative, and links them together in a dream: “*mon rêve tenace qui tente de rassembler les cendres du temps...*”(p. 163).

The dream centres on the writing found on the walls of the sepulchres of the princess’s companions. This writing on the wall, another example of the Berber script, predates even that of the Dougga, in other words is over four centuries older

¹²⁰ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the ladder of writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers, p. 65. *Three Steps on the ladder of writing* is the translation of the script of the Wellek Library Lectures, given by Cixous in May 1990, and as far as I could ascertain, these lectures have not been published in French. Cixous refers here to her rewriting of a Grimm fairy tale. It is the story of a king who kept his daughters imprisoned and who could not understand why the princesses kept wearing out their shoes. Unknown to him, his daughters were escaping into the forest night after night by opening a trap door under their bed.

¹²¹ Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous, A Politics of Writing*, p. 105.

than Tin Hinan. In a scene reminiscent of Daniel and King Belshazzar, Djébar's interpretation of the writing on the wall comes to her in a dream. In her dream, it is the princess who conserves this ancient writing, and gives it to her companions before taking her last breath. Djébar then takes hold of this *écriture* and visualises it stretching back into time, going back four centuries to Jugurtha's reign, and then forward four centuries to that of Tin Hinan, effectuating a neat closure to her historical narrative.

J'imagine donc la princesse du Hoggar qui, autrefois dans sa fuite, emporta l'alphabet archaïque, puis en confia les caractères à ses amies, juste avant de mourir.

Ainsi, plus de quatre siècles après la résistance et le dramatique échec de Yougourtha au Nord, quatre siècles également avant celui, grandiose, de la Kahina - la reine berbère qui résistera à la conquête arabe-, Tin Hinan des sables, presque effacée, nous laisse héritage - et cela, malgré ses os hélas aujourd'hui dérangés - : notre écriture la plus secrète, aussi ancienne que l'étrusque ou que celle des "runes" mais, contrairement à celles-ci, toute bruissante encore de sons et de souffles d'aujourd'hui, est bien legs de femme, au plus profond du désert.

Tin Hinan ensevelie dans le ventre de l'Afrique! (p. 164).

The image of Tin Hinan becomes mythologically charged as she is reinstated as the female guardian of *une écriture* which at the end of the narrative belongs not to the Occident or to the Orient but to "le continent noir" - Africa. This *écriture* is buried in the heart of Africa yet alive in the form of "souffle".

Souffles et Sorties?

Cixous also refers to writing as "souffle" when she describes the compulsion to write as being swept up by a powerful wind emanating from an unfathomable inner source : "Le souffle 'veut' une forme. 'Ecris-moi!'"¹²³ In Djébar's narrative, it is *l'écriture* rather than *le souffle* which is the starting point: "L'écriture est souffle. Ecoute la!"¹²⁴ Cixous obeys the command to write, and eventually finds her home in *une écriture féminine*, a site of writing where she is no longer excluded. Djébar's explorers eventually open their ears to the voices around them. Yet even as the

¹²² Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 57.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 18.

Europeans discover the truth about the Berber language, even as they discover its true usage, the Berber people themselves are ironically losing its usage. Djebbar who sets off on her journey from the starting-point of exclusion finds herself back where she started - excluded from *écriture*.

Tandis que le secret se dévoile, femmes et hommes, depuis l'oasis de Siwa en Egypte jusqu'à l'Atlantique, et même au-delà jusqu'aux îles Canaries, combien sont-ils encore - combien sommes-nous encore - toutes et tous à chanter, à pleurer, à hululer, mais aussi à aimer, installés plutôt dans l'impossibilité d'aimer -, oui, combien sommes-nous, bien qu'héritiers du bey Ahmed, des Touaregs du siècle dernier et des édiles bilingues de Dougga, à nous sentir exilés de leur première écriture? (p. 150).

Djebbar's *écriture des femmes* leaves her in a position of exclusion. She is still an orphan of language whereas Cixous has found not une "hommicile fixe"¹²⁵ but a "mobile" home, in her in-between spaces. So unlike Cixous, Djebbar's return to *l'écriture des femmes* does not provide a *sortie* from the prison-house of language but returns to her original starting-point of exile.

Nevertheless Djebbar's historical narrative, and in particular her reappropriation of a matriarchal language, can be interpreted as a means of challenging the dominance of patriarchal language. Cixous recognises the merits of this kind of historical approach but at the same time points out its limitations. For although *l'histoire de l'écriture des femmes* does challenge the pre-eminence of patriarchal society and language, and is "une façon de penser autrement l'histoire de la domination masculine", this challenge relates only to the past and not to the future - it does not provide a mechanism for change. Change, claims Cixous, can only be achieved by inventing the other story, not by reinventing history:

On peut divaguer longtemps sur une hypothétique préhistoire et sur une époque matriarcale. Ou on peut, comme le fit Bachofen, tenter de refigurer une société gynécocratique, d'en tirer des effets poétiques et mythiques à portée puissamment subversive quant à l'histoire de la famille et du pouvoir mâle. Toutes les façons de penser autrement l'histoire du pouvoir, de la propriété, la domination masculine ... ont une efficacité. Mais le changement en cours n'a que faire de la question de "l'origine". Il y a du phallogentrisme.

¹²⁴ My phraseology.

¹²⁵ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 41.

... Le phallocentrisme est l'ennemi. De tous Et il est temps de transformer.
D'inventer l'autre histoire.¹²⁶

Whether or not *l'écriture féminine* has such revolutionary potential is itself another story .

Part 3 - The family history

In Part 3, Djébar moves on from a writing that is matriarchal in the sense that it is "owned" by a matriarchal society to one that is matriarchal in the sense that tells the family history on her maternal side. Here Djébar's *écriture* rejoins Cixous's "écriture matricielle" in its strong identification with other women, blurring the boundaries of autobiography, as the self is traversed by the other:

Femmes pour femmes: en la femme toujours se maintient la force productive de l'autre, en particulier de l'autre femme. En elle matricielle, berceuse-donneuse, elle-même sa mère et son enfant, elle-même sa fille-soeur. ¹²⁷

Eyes - open and shut

In a succession of moving short stories Djébar foregrounds the sisterhood and suffering of her relatives and ancestors, who are trapped within the prison walls of patriarchy and colonialism. By allowing these women to hold centre stage, she aims to dislocate the traditional male viewpoint which denies woman her subjectivity. Djébar's women are no longer reduced to being the object of the ubiquitous male gaze ("Car ils épient, ils observent, ils scrutent, ils espionnent! ... la rue est à eux, le monde est à eux." (p. 175)), as Cixous's appeal to women to "disloque[r] ce 'dans', qu'elle l'explose, le retourne.." is answered in Djébar's collective mission statement:

Nous toutes, du monde des femmes de l'ombre, renversant la démarche: nous enfin qui regardons, nous qui commençons. (p. 175)

The writer resists the male gaze with the female eye, but also with the eye of the camera. Interlaced with the short stories in Part 3, are Djébar's memories of the

¹²⁶ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, pp. 151-52.

¹²⁷ Hélène Cixous, "Le Rire de la Méduse", p. 44.

experience of directing her film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*. The camera and her text both become eyes with which she can resist the male gaze, but Djebbar takes the image further as the film-maker passes the camera to a veiled silhouette, a gesture Mortimer foregrounds as “the giving of a gift to a veiled silhouette, the cloistered sister who, by peeking through the lens, may reclaim her subjectivity.”¹²⁸:

Cette image-réalité de mon enfance, de celle de ma mère et de mes tantes, de mes cousines parfois du même âge que moi, ce scandale qu'enfant j'ai vécu norme-, voici qu'elle surgit au départ de cette quête: silhouette unique de femme, rassemblant dans les pans de son linge-linceul les quelque cinq cents millions de ségréguées du monde islamique, c'est elle soudain qui regarde, mais derrière la caméra, elle qui, par un trou libre dans une face masquée, dévore le monde. (p. 174)

With this gift Djebbar enters into Cixous's Realm of the *Gift*, by symbolically stepping aside to allow the cloistered woman to look out. The veiled woman is on both sides of the camera, looking out through the camera lens, giving her access to the world, and looking out from the text-screen, giving the world access to her.

The image of the eye is double. Djebbar *resists* with her eyes, by reappropriating the female gaze but like Cixous (“... j'entre à l'intérieur de moi les yeux fermés, et ça se lit ¹²⁹) also *submits* to the unconscious by shutting her eyes, in an image where she, like Cixous, evokes “le lit”, in her case “le lit d'enfant” as she observes a sleeping child, a young shepherdess turned film-prop who has succumbed to tiredness on set :

Telle fut aussi ma manière d'aborder l'image-son: les yeux fermés, pour saisir d'abord le rythme, le bruit des gouffres qu'on croit noyés, remonter ensuite à la surface et enfin, regard lavé, tout percevoir dans une lumière d'aurore. (p. 273)

With her eyes shut, her ears, like those of Cixous, are attuned to “les silencieux désirs”, the silent cries of her people:

¹²⁸ Mildred Mortimer, “Assia Djebbar's Algerian Quartet”, *Research in African Literatures*, 28: 2 p.13 [This version was down-loaded from the internet. The page number will vary in the original].

¹²⁹ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 57.

M'ai taillé de nouvelles oreilles pour l'avenir et j'ai entendu les cris du monde, les rages et les appels des peuples, les chants des corps, la musique des supplices et la musique des extases. J'écoute.¹³⁰

In the succession of stories that comprise Part 3, what emerges above is a litany of silent suffering and a celebration of silent courage from the quiet dignity of her great grand-mother following her marriage, at the age of fourteen, to an octogenarian, to a young child's self-imposed mutism in the aftermath of her sister's death, to the mother's silent tears at the imprisonment of her son at the hands of the colonial authorities. In Part 3 Djébar is "à l'écoute", her ears attuned to the sounds of silence, the silent tears, the silent screams of her people, echoing Cixous's universal embrace: "Que de larmes je verse la nuit! Les eaux du monde s'écoulent de mes yeux, je lave mes peuples dans mon désespoir, je les baigne, je les lèche avec mon amour, je vais aux rives des Nils, pour recueillir les peuples abandonnés dans des berceaux d'osier."¹³¹

The Dream

This final part of this review will concentrate on a single passage at the end of Part 3, which describes a dream whose violent images evoke through their compression the depth of suppressed emotions contained within the main body of the text. In this dream Isma is aware of an obstruction in her vocal chords, removes an offending muscle at the back of her throat with a knife, and then releases not her own voice, but a piercing cry, the continuous lament of her people, "la souffrance des autres".

In the dream the narrator physically *materialises* the suffering of her people: her body literally becomes the conduit of her people's suffering as she physically disgorges their silent screams. Then by a tortuous process of identification, the writer and the silent scream become one: "Je ne crie pas, je suis le cri" (p. 339). And, just as her body physically materialises their pain, the dream-text itself materialises, exposes in material signs, the underlying currents of repressed suffering contained in the main body of the text.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 53.

In the dream the writer is travailed by what Cixous calls “the process of the same and the other”, Djebbar interiorises within her self the sufferings of the other. This process of identification when taken to the extreme can entail a loss of self which Cixous identifies and which Isma then experiences, as self recedes and she becomes the other:

Or écrire c'est travailler; être travaillé; (dans) l'entre, interroger, (se laisser interroger) le procès du même *et de* l'autre ... en voulant ensemble de l'un-avec-l'autre, dynamisé à l'infini par un incessant échange de l'un entre l'autre ... Et cela ne se fait pas sans risque, sans douleur, sans perte, de moments de soi, de conscience, de personnes que l'on a été, que l'on dépasse, que l'on quitte.¹³²

“Le procès du même et de l'autre”

In the liberating locus of the unconscious, both Djebbar and Cixous focus on the mouth as the site of release: “Le jour se cache? La nuit *les langues* sont déliées, les livres s'ouvrent et se révèlent, ce à quoi je n'arrive pas, mes rêves y arrivent pour moi.”¹³³ The mouth is the orifice from which repressed language (in the case of Cixous) and repressed suffering (in the case of Djebbar) are released.

In the beginning of Isma's dream, however, the mouth is obstructed by a mysterious substance, preventing this release: “Et ce rêve récurrent qui hante mes nuits! Au fond de ma bouche ouverte, une pâte molle et visqueuse, une glaire stagne, coule peu à peu et je m'enfonce dans le malaise irrémédiablement” (pp. 338-39). The focus shifts from a feeling of discomfort in her throat to an awareness of a specific obstruction of her vocal chords. This obstruction is preventing her from *expressing* the repressed suffering of her people, impeding the disgorging of this suffering through the passage of the throat, preventing *la sortie de l'autre*:

L'écriture, c'est en moi le passage, entrée, sortie, séjour, de l'autre que je suis et ne suis pas, que je ne sais pas être, mais que je sens passer, qui me fait vivre, - qui me déchire, m'inquiète, m'altère, qui? - une, un, des?, plusieurs,

¹³² Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 159.

¹³³ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 50. [My emphasis]

de l'inconnu qui me donne justement l'envie de connaître à partir de laquelle s'élance toute vie...¹³⁴

In Isma's dream the passage through which the other must pass is physically materialised as the pharynx and the obstruction of this passage is literally life-threatening, as the desire to give voice to the suffering of others becomes an urgent physical necessity:

Il me faut arracher cette pâte de mon palais, elle m'étouffe; je tente de vomir, je vomis quoi, sinon une puanteur blanchâtre, enracinée au plus profond de mon gosier. Ces dernières nuits, l'encombrement pharyngien a été pis: il m'a fallu couper au couteau une sorte de muscle inutile qui m'écorche, crachat enserré à mes cordes vocales. (p. 339)

Djebar, like Cixous, describes the relationship to writing in terms of giving birth to the other ("Chaque nuit, l'effort musculaire de cet enfantement par la bouche, de cette mise au silence me lancine" p. 339), and in both cases the process of labour is preceded by an experience of a giving up of the self, in Cixous's case death to the self, and in Djebar's case a detachment from the self. For in Isma's urgent need to express the suffering of others, her own physical pain is sublimated to the sufferings of the other:

Ma bouche demeure béante; mes doigts tenaces s'activent entre mes dents, un spasme me tord l'abdomen, rancœur ou embarras irrépressible. Je ne ressens pas l'horreur de cet état: j'ai pris la lame, je tâche de trancher tout au fond, lentement, soigneusement, cette glu suspendue sous ma glotte. Le sang étalé sur mes doigts, ce sang qui ne m'emplit pas la bouche, semble soudain léger, neutre, un liquide prêt non à s'écouler, plutôt à s'évaporer au-dedans de mon corps.

J'exerce cet effort d'amputation avec précision: je ne me demande pas si je souffre, si je me blesse, surtout si je vais demeurer sans voix. (p. 339))

This "perte de soi", expressed physically in terms of amputation, echoes Cixous's conviction that in order to give birth to the other the writer must first die to the self: "Et je dis: il faut avoir été aimée par la mort, pour naître et passer à l'écriture."¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 158.

¹³⁵ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 44.

D'abord elle meurt. Ensuite elle aime Je n'ai rien à dire sur ma mort. Elle a été trop grande pour moi jusqu'ici. D'une certaine manière tous mes textes en sont "nés". L'ont fuie. En sont issus Sans elle - ma mort je n'aurais pas écrit. Pas déchiré le voile de ma gorge. Pas poussé le cri qui déchire les oreilles, qui fend les murs. ¹³⁶

Cixous's own image of an obstructed pharynx (interestingly it is Cixous but not Djébar who incorporates the torn *veil*) could almost be superimposed on that of Djébar's. Both are travailed by the process of the same and the other, a physical process that involves suffering/death, giving birth, a rending of the pharynx, and the disgorging of a powerful cry:

Chaque nuit l'effort musculaire de cet enfantement par la bouche, de cette mise au silence me lancine. Je vomis quoi, peut-être un long cri ancestral. Ma bouche ouverte expulse indéfiniment la souffrance des autres, des ensevelies avant moi, moi qui croyais apparaître à peine au premier rai de la première lumière. (p. 339)

Both Cixous and Djébar are "writing the body" and the physicality of this act is reinforced in both cases by the muscular effort of giving birth to the other/text:

Ecrire: comme si j'avais encore envie de jouir, de me sentir pleine, de pousser, de sentir la force de mes muscles, et mon harmonie, d'être enceinte et au même moment de me donner les joies de la parturition, celles de la mère et celles de l'enfant."¹³⁷

Both writers are travailed by the process of the same and the other. For Cixous the writer can be both mother and child, the one who gives birth and the one who is begotten. For Djébar she is first of all the voice of the other, but then becomes the embodiment of that voice: "Je ne crie pas. Je suis le cri"(p. 339). But whereas in the scriptural delivery room, Cixous's child-text is dripping with mother's milk ("Je déborde! Mes seins débordent! Du lait. De l'encre. L'heure de la tétée.")¹³⁸, Djébar's text-cry is covered in rapidly evaporating blood ("Le sang étalé sur mes doigts, ce sang qui ne m'emplit pas la bouche, semble soudain léger, neutre, un liquide prêt non à s'écouler, plutôt à s'évaporer au-dedans de mon corps." p. 339).

¹³⁶ Ibid. , p. 42.

¹³⁷ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, pp. 37-38.

¹³⁸ Ibid. , p. 37.

As both writers rejoin the other, their images of writing coalesce in the cosmic scale of their vision of themselves in their relation to that other. In the place of the cosmic mother strutting her pregnant belly, we have a cosmic mouth, incessantly expelling the sufferings of others ("Ma bouche ouverte expulse indéfiniment la souffrance des autres"). This cosmic perspective is perpetuated in the final image of the dream:

Je ne crie pas, je suis le cri tendu dans un vol vibrant et aveugle; la procession blanche des aïeules-fantômes derrière moi devient armée qui me propulse, se lèvent les mots de la langue perdue qui vacille, tandis que les mâles au-devant gesticulent dans le champ de la mort, ou de ses masques. (p. 339)

"Le cri" becomes *a weapon* wielded by an army of veiled women in a scene reminiscent of Cixous's "*champ de bataille*". Here we have a battle between man and woman in which *language is a powerful weapon*, resonating with the echo of *the lost Voice*, "les mots de la langue perdue", and which carries within it the possibility of transformation, as the *passive* floating shadow-like figures of the preface are transformed into *an active army* of veiled women driving her writing forward, as its cry cuts through "*le silence de l'écriture*". It is as if she goes back to the preface, takes hold of the piercing arrow of patriarchal language aimed *inwards* at her soul, and then aims it *back* into "*le champ de la mort*" in the form of her winged cry-self.

As the text goes full circle, Djébar, like Cixous, discovers the power of language as a weapon against the prevailing powers of patriarchy, and the power of the voice to recapture the repressed. Writing is no longer paralysed by its relationship to the past but dynamised by the presence of the voice: "Ce regard réflexif sur le passé pouvait susciter une dynamique pour une quête sur le présent, sur un avenir à la porte" (p. 298). Ironically however, the neat closure of the dream-text (with its counter-relation to the preface) suggests that the dream itself is not merely the product of the other (unconscious), but rather a very conscious construction.

¹³⁹ Hélène Cixous, *La Venue à l'écriture*, p. 52.

Part 4- Le sang de l'écriture

In this final part, Djébar's writing rejoins the present, no longer in the sense of the *presence* of voice, but in the sense of "*l'actualité*". And, as Algeria's "champ de la mort" fills the horizon, "l'Algérie mère" mutates into "Algérie amère" (p. 347), the mother-land suddenly transformed into a macabre monstrosity: "... le monstre Algérie - et ne l'appellez plus femme, peut-être goule, ou vorace centauresse surgie de quels abysses, non, même pas 'femme sauvage'" (p. 345). And as *l'écriture* struggles to express "le massacre des autres", the writer's body materialises the thoughts of the dead:

Car les morts qu'on croit enterrer aujourd'hui désormais s'envolent. Eux, les allègres, les allégés ... Les morts qu'on croit absents se muent en témoins qui, à travers nous, désirent écrire! ... Ecrire, les morts d'aujourd'hui désirent écrire: or, avec le sang, comment écrire? (p. 346)

In a variation on Cixous writing in mother's milk, in white ink, Djébar writes in the freshly-shed blood, in red ink: "Comment inscrire traces avec un sang qui coule, ou qui vient juste de couler? ... Mais avec le sang même: avec son flux, sa pâte, son jet, sa croûte pas tout à fait séchée?" (pp. 346-47). And, as the life-blood is sucked out of her people, the fire-red blood of writing, turns to embers, not milky-white, but deathly-white: "Le sang, pour moi, reste blanc cendre ... Le sang ne sèche pas, simplement il s'éteint" (p. 347).

Writing is forever displaced not by the endless movement of the signifier but by the continuous stream of blood. In a final spiralling movement, *l'écriture* endlessly pursues the cycle of death perpetuated by an "Algérie-monstre" hounding the antelope of death. And, as the bloodthirsty nation and the writing existing in the *sang-rapport* themselves become caught up in a final battle of mythic proportions, the writer ingests "l'Algérie-monstre" in a dramatic finale:

Ecrire pour cerner la poursuite inlassable
Le cercle ouvert à chaque pas se referme
La mort devant, antilope cernée
L'Algérie chasserresse, en moi, est avalée. (p. 348)

Conclusion

In *Vaste est la prison*, Djebbar, like Cixous, is trying to find ways out of the oppositionary prison-house of patriarchy, both on the level of human relationships, and on the level of language. The preface identifies the phenomenon of opposition in language and society in the form of segregation, whereas Part 1 materialises the phenomenon, as “le mari” and “l’Aimé” conform to oppositional roles pinpointed by Cixous, “l’homme-ennemi” and “l’homme-Dieu”.

In the final images of Part 1 Djebbar does manage to effectuate *une sortie* from the oppositionary mode of relations, and following on from Cixous, this *sortie* is achieved at the level of *écriture*, in an in-between zone, beyond the symbolic, where Isma and “l’Aimé” enter into a mobile space of same and otherness, resonant of Cixous’s process of the same and the other.

On the level of language, Djebbar and Cixous use different strategies to combat what is essentially the same problem, namely their feeling of alienation with regard to patriarchal language. But whereas Cixous finally finds ways out of the linguistic prison-house, by exploring *une écriture féminine*, Djebbar’s return to a matriarchal language does not provide a *sortie*. At the end of her historical quest (Part 2), she is still an exile of language: she has no language to call her own.

In the final part of the work, however, Djebbar embraces another kind of matriarchal writing, not one that belongs to a matriarchal society but rather one that gives voice to the women down the maternal line of her family. As it gives voice to the other, Djebbar’s writing rejoins Cixous’s “écriture matricielle”. And, as *écriture* is travailed by “le procès du même et de l’autre”, Djebbar finally finds another way of accessing the lost Mother-Voice, so longed for in *L’Amour, la fantasia*:

En fait, je recherche, comme un lait dont on m’aurait autrefois écartée, la pléthore amoureuse de la langue de ma mère. Contre la ségrégation de mon héritage, le mot plein de l’amour-au-présent me devient une parade hirondelle.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Assia Djebbar, *L’Amour, la fantasia*, p. 80.

As Djébar's eyes are opened to the law of opposition at work in the Arabic language (in *Vaste est la prison*) she may no longer yearn for her mother-tongue, but she does discover another m/other from which her texts can be born. In Part 3, Djébar, like Cixous, writes in white ink, creating "une écriture presque invisible", "une écriture de l'autre", which can be materialised but not appropriated into the self-referential order of patriarchy.

But, as the writing of the past catches up with the present, Djébar finds herself exiled not only from the mother-tongue, but from the mother-land. The metamorphosis of the mother-land produces a transmutation in the substance of *écriture*, as the writing of the m/other, "l'écriture du lait" encounters rivers of blood and her text becomes stained with the indelible mark of "le sang des autres."

In dialogue with Irigaray: *Ombre sultane*

Introduction

“Elle s’est voulue marieuse de son propre mari.”¹ In *Ombre sultane*, by a twist of fate, a woman becomes her ex-husband’s matchmaker. Isma, an educated, emancipated Algerian divorcée arranges for her ex-husband to marry Hajila, an illiterate traditional woman from “le bidonville”. In the course of the novel a fundamental change takes place in the relationship between these two women. In this chapter I propose to focus on this change, which I will analyse in the light of Luce Irigaray’s ideas.

Both Irigaray and Djébar are concerned with the problematic of relations between women, which they view as characterised by a fundamental rivalry in relation to men and to each other. Irigaray attributes the negative relations between women to their lack of subjectivity. Having been denied subjectivity they are incapable of subject-to-subject relations.

For Irigaray the problem of women’s subjectivity is not a social or biological one but a symbolic one. It originates in the “original sin” committed by the symbolic order, what Whitford refers to as “a buried act of matricide”.² According to Irigaray, the paternal symbolic order is founded on the “murder”, the non-symbolisation, *non-recognition*, or repression of the maternal-feminine. Irigaray’s objective is to bring about symbolic change. If the symbolic order is founded on this act of non-recognition, then any change in the Symbolic can only be achieved *as a result of the recognition of that other, the repressed or unconscious maternal-feminine*. It is only when that “other” is recognised, when woman can take her place in the symbolic order as subject, that she will be capable of positive subject-to-subject relations.

In *Ombre sultane*, the problem of rivalry between women resurfaces on a narrative rather than on a philosophical level. The problem of rivalry and the possibility of

¹ Assia Djébar, *Ombre sultane* (Paris: Editions Jean-Claude Lattès, 1987), p. 9.

² Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London and New York: Routledge 1991), p. 33.

change, of another, positive mode of relations between women is embodied in the relationship between the two principal characters, Hajila and Isma. In this chapter, using a psychological model, I demonstrate that the condition for symbolic change specified by Irigaray, *namely the recognition of the repressed maternal-feminine*, operates on a narrative level in *Ombre sultane*. In the novel, change in the relationship between Hajila and Isma also takes place as a result of the acknowledgement of the repressed or unconscious maternal-feminine³.

Taking as my starting-point Irigaray's proposition that such a shift in consciousness is necessary before female subjectivity and sociality can come into being, I propose to examine the novel with the aim of demonstrating:

- How the unconscious maternal-feminine is acknowledged in *Ombre sultane*;
- How the positive change in the relationship between Hajila and Isma (as a result of this shift of consciousness) compares to the transformation of subject-to-subject relations which Irigaray envisions for women.

Irigaray

Introduction

In all forms of feminism there is a tension between the critique of an unsatisfactory present and the requirement, experienced as psychological or political, for some blueprint, however sketchy, of the future.⁴

In my introduction to Irigaray I will mainly concentrate on her "critique of an unsatisfactory present". This critique, which is single-minded in its focus, but wide-ranging in its application, has been deftly summarised as follows:

³ Although the unconscious is commonly associated with what cannot be expressed, Irigaray refers to the possibility of the unconscious or unconscious thoughts being acknowledged or "released" through psychoanalysis. It is in the sense that I refer to the "acknowledgement or release of the feminine-unconscious". Moreover, as the term "feminine-unconscious" suggests, Irigaray posits a relation between the unconscious and the feminine imaginary. In the first instance, she uses Freud's notion of the unconscious as a metaphor for the *cultural* position of femininity. Taking this idea further, Irigaray posits: "a close resemblance between the unconscious in its relation to consciousness and women in relation to patriarchal social relations". Using Freud's identification of the repressed with femininity, she goes a step further still: "if what is repressed is feminine, she claims, it is possible to regard women, not as *having* an unconscious, but as *being* it (for men, for the phallic, for patriarchy)". See Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), pp. 106-07.

⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

... Irigaray is dealing with a single problem, in its multiple aspects: the absence of and *exclusion of woman/women* from the symbolic/social order, and their representation as nature. This problem is reworked and restated over and over again, in a variety of discursive formulations, in terms borrowed from a variety of philosophers, and in relation to a wide variety of different conceptual systems.⁵

In this theoretical résumé, I will examine both the *basis* of Irigaray's critique of the symbolic (its "*exclusion of women*") and her critical *strategy* (mimicry), as well as alluding to the analogy between her critical method and the workings of psychoanalysis. As far as Irigaray's "blueprint for the future" is concerned, here I refer to her idea of a maternal genealogy. Finally, I would suggest that the reference (in the first citation above) to the tension between an unsatisfactory present and a utopian future is reductive in terms of Irigaray's *later* thinking which acknowledges the influence of *past* genealogies and hazards the possibility of achieving sexual difference in the *present* (I will return to these last two ideas in the sections on *Ombre sultane*).

Critique of symbolic systems - Masculinity and mimicry

Irigaray's analysis of an "unsatisfactory present" takes the form of a sweeping critique of the symbolic order and all its conceptual systems: "... lois au sens strict et aussi langues, religions, arts, sciences, techniques."⁶ According to her, the founding gesture of the symbolic order is "a buried act of matricide"⁷, a proposition that is reformulated as the repression of the feminine, and in particular of the mother-figure.

Irigaray believes that the very construction of the patriarchal symbolic order hinges on this "murder" of the maternal-feminine. The maternal-feminine represents the foundation upon which the symbolic order is constructed: as the Law of the Father is erected, the Body of the Mother is removed from view (forgotten, disavowed). Irigaray's project can be compared to that of a criminal pathologist, as she exhumes the Body of the Mother, revealing the underlying maternal-feminine, exposes the perpetrators of the crime (masculine systems of thought), denounces their repressive

⁵ Ibid. , p. 170. [My emphasis]

⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Le Temps de la différence* (Livre de Poche, 1989). Insert from back cover.

⁷ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 33.

methods, and attempts to perform a miracle in bringing the maternal-feminine back to the symbolic.

According to Irigaray "Toute théorie du 'sujet' aura toujours été appropriée au 'masculin'".⁸ The masculine has not only monopolised all sense of personal subjectivity but also all areas of conceptual subjectivity. On the level of personal subjectivity, any sense of self which woman achieves is necessarily in relation to the masculine and therefore not her own: "S'y réobjectivant elle-même quand elle prétend s'identifier 'comme' un sujet masculin."⁹ Irigaray makes a direct connection between the objectivisation of the female subject and the repression of the feminine on a conceptual level: "La subjectivité déniée à la femme telle est, sans doute, l'hypothèque garante de toute constitution irréductible d'objet: de représentation, de discours, de désir."¹⁰

For Irigaray women inevitably figure as the object of masculine discourse. This objectification of women on a personal level is reformulated on a conceptual level as the repression of the maternal-feminine. Thus all conceptual systems are masculine systems which have repressed the maternal-feminine. All subjects (*subjects* of philosophy, psychology, religion, law and language) are dominated by an all-embracing masculine imaginary.

Of particular interest to Irigaray is the masculine dominance of the linguistic code. Irigaray argues that woman has no language of her own and that she can therefore never speak as herself - her language is always caught up in the discourse of the dominant linguistic code. Women are therefore compelled to imitate masculine discourse in order for their language to be "symbolically received". Aware of the difficulty of entering into masculine discourse in order to criticise it, and the impossibility of expressing herself outside its boundaries, Irigaray comes up with another strategy, that of mimicking the female position of mimicry: "Hers is a theatrical staging of the mime: miming the miming imposed on woman, Irigaray's

⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), p. 165.

⁹ Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 165.

subtle specular move (her mimicry *mirrors* that of all women) intends to *undo* the effects of phallogentric discourse simply by *overdoing* them.”¹¹

Irigaray’s mimetic strategy hinges on her selective, extensive quoting from the discourses which she wants to undermine, quotations interwoven with her own writing in such a way as to make it difficult to work out where one ends and the other begins. The effect of this selective quotation is to highlight the points where the maternal-feminine is “conspicuous by its absence”: “Le féminin étant dès lors à déchiffrer comme inter-dit: dans les signes ou entre eux, entre des significations réalisées, entre les lignes...”¹² Imitation in the Irigarayan sense is no longer a form of flattery but a sophisticated form of ridicule, a way of destabilising masculine discourse from within, of turning masculine discourse against itself.

The aim of Irigaray’s mimetic strategy is to show that all its masculine theories not only repress the feminine other but also conform to a specular logic, a logic of the same: “‘Specularization’ ... hints at a basic assumption underlying all Western philosophical discourse: the necessity of postulating a subject that is capable of *reflecting* on its own being.”¹³ Irigaray posits the masculine subject in front of the mirror, gazing at his own reflection. In this scenario, the woman becomes the material basis (the tain of the mirror) which permits the specularisation to take place, and which at the same time denies her any possibility of representation.

Woman comes to be equated with the absent image, with that which is beyond representation, but also with the forbidden image, with that which is censored or repressed. Irigaray not only identifies the feminine with the repressed, but proceeds to identify the feminine imaginary with the process of the unconscious, both being characterised by fluidity, mobility, and a resistance to the laws of logic, and finally to equate the two as one:

Ainsi pourrait-on se demander si certaines propriétés attribuées à l’inconscient ne sont pas, pour une part, référables au sexe féminin censuré de

¹¹ Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 140.

¹² Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l’autre femme*, p. 20.

¹³ Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics*, p. 132.

la logique de la conscience. Si le féminin a un inconscient ou s'il est l'inconscient.¹⁴

In *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the feminine*, Whitford relates Irigaray's own position in relation to the philosophers she criticises to a psychoanalytical model. She visualises Irigaray attempting to "unbind or loosen" the feminine-unconscious of the masculine discourses with which she engages. In this model Irigaray functions as analyst, and her masculine subjects (such as the subjects or fathers of philosophy and psychology) function as analysands. With Freud and then Plato on the couch, Irigaray takes on the role of psychoanalyst, releasing their unconscious thoughts, liberating the feminine-unconscious of philosophical and psychoanalytical discourse:

Freud on the couch

In *Spéculum de l'autre femme* Irigaray comes face to face with her first patient Freud, and finds this particular analysand in profound denial, refusing to acknowledge the specificity of a feminine sexuality.

Irigaray contends that underlying Freud's theory of sexuality is the assumption of "sexual indifference" (the presupposition that there is only one *masculine* sex rather than two differentiated sexes), and the imposition of a male model of sexuality. Stripping Freud down to basics, Irigaray reduces his theory of sexual "difference" to the presence or absence of the male attribute. And, with this scopophilic interpretation of sexuality, *female* sexuality is reduced to a negation:

En effet, cette sexualité n'est jamais définie par rapport à un autre sexe que le masculin. Il n'y a pas, pour Freud, *deux sexes* dont les différences s'articuleraient dans l'acte sexuel, et plus généralement dans les processus imaginaires et symboliques qui règlent un fonctionnement social et culturel. Le "féminin" est toujours décrit comme défaut, atrophie, revers du seul sexe qui monopolise la valeur: le sexe masculin.¹⁵

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 71.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

Freud proceeds from theory of want (lack) of the male attribute to his theory of want (desire for or envy of) the male attribute, “la trop célèbre ‘envie du pénis’”¹⁶. This is a transition which Irigaray refuses to make : “Comment accepter que tout le devenir sexuel de la femme soit commandé par le manque, et donc l’envie, la jalousie, la revendication, du sexe masculin?”¹⁷ She prefers to dismiss Freud’s “penis envy” as a projection of his own unconscious fears: “... ‘l’envie du pénis’ telle qu’elle est attribuée à la femme pallie l’angoisse de l’homme, de Freud, concernant la cohérence de son édifice narcissique, le rassure contre ce qu’il appelle la peur de la castration.”¹⁸

According to Irigaray, the theory of penis envy serves to validate the masculine sex, to affirm the primacy of masculinity (reflecting man’s sexuality back to himself), and to reduce both masculine and feminine sexuality to the economy of the same, (defining the other/feminine in terms of the same/masculine sexuality): “Mais, prisonnier lui-même d’une certaine économie du logos, il définit la différence sexuelle en fonction de l’a priori du Même, recourant pour étayer sa démonstration, aux procédés de toujours: l’analogie...”¹⁹

Redirecting death-drives

Irigaray rejects Freud’s theory of sexuality based on the economy of the same and looks to another economy, the economy of the other (unconscious), to explain both the absence of, and the possibility of recovering sexual difference: “Mais l’articulation possible du rapport entre l’économie inconsciente et la différence des sexes n’est pas réalisée par lui [Freud].”

According to Irigaray, sexual difference, or the presence of two separate sexual subjectivities (male and female) is not realised in the symbolic because of the different way in which men and women relate to the economy of the unconscious. Men externalise their (unconscious) death drives, projecting them onto women, whereas women cannot sublimate their death-drives (at some other’s expense) and

¹⁶ Ibid. , pp. 67-68.

¹⁷ Ibid. , p. 68.

¹⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l’autre femme*, p. 58.

are forced to internalise them (making them more vulnerable to self-destructive impulses). The result of this is that woman is deprived of her subjectivity, she is reduced to becoming the object or “receptacle” of man’s repressed drives. She occupies the locus of his unconscious or, as Irigaray would have it, she functions *as* his unconscious.

So, according to Irigaray, the dividing line between the conscious and the unconscious is currently drawn *between* the sexes, (with man representing the conscious, and woman *his* unconscious). What Irigaray then advocates is a realignment of this split, arguing that the divisions between conscious and unconscious should not be drawn *between* the sexes but *within* them - “[the divisions] should be internal to each sex”.²⁰ Each sex should be able to sublimate its own death drives, each should have its *own* unconscious or other. Openly challenging Lacan’s statement that “there is no Other of the Other”,²¹ Irigaray proclaims female otherness to be the very condition for woman’s coming into being, for her accession to subjectivity and for the realisation of sexual difference.

Irigaray suggests that the symbolisation (validation, representation) of the mother-daughter relationship is one of the keys to the coming into being of a symbolic order in which both men and women exist as subjects, each sublimating their own death-drives. This is because she believes that the objectification of women is perpetuated by the mother-daughter relationship, and that the transformation of that relationship could signal a way forward towards female subjectivity. As evidence of this objectivisation, she points to the way female identity is formed, claiming that the daughter objectifies herself in the very process of identifying herself with her mother (who is already posited as object): “Elle ne peut réduire sa mère en objet sans s’y réduire elle-même parce qu’elles ont le même sexe.”²²

Within the masculine economy of the same, both mother and daughter exist not only as objects of man’s death drives but also as objects of desire. Irigaray points to the

¹⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*, p. 70.

²⁰ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 93.

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), p. 311.

²² Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et Parentés* (Paris: Minuit, 1987), p. 210.

paralysis of relations between mother and daughter caused by the fact that they are both in constant competition for what Irigaray describes as *the same space*, in other words that of the desire (or attention) of the father. According to Irigaray, the static positionality or paralysis created by the competition of the two for the one space needs to be transformed into a dynamic relationality where mother and daughter relate not to men as objects but to each other as separate subjects. For there to be separation or difference between mother and daughter, the daughter must relate to her mother not just as a mother but as a “separate” subject in her own right.

For Irigaray the restoration of the mother-daughter relationship is the key to the restoration of other relationships between women. Having acceded to subjectivity, they would then be able to enter into subject-to-subject relations with other women, and to be part of what Irigaray calls an “entre-femmes”.

Plato on the couch: Material girl

Irigaray’s encounter with her next analysand, Plato, focuses on her analysis of his cave myth. Her critique of Plato’s thinking reveals that he too excludes women, not from the domain of sexuality, but from the realm of the transcendental. For in Plato’s universe women are relegated to the material world, existing merely as “corps-matière”.

In *Spéculum*, Plato’s three scenes of the cave, the world and the Idea, become the staging-ground for a reformulation of Irigaray’s recurrent themes - the underlying sexual bias of masculine discourse, its perpetuation of the economy of the same, and the exclusion of woman from philosophical discourse.

Irigaray sees in the myth a re-enactment of the sexual act, with the cavern featuring as the womb of the mother, and the realm of the Idea starring as the seed of the Father. Although the prisoner starts his journey from the cavern (origin, mother) he moves progressively away from the cave towards the Realm of Ideas (or Origin, Father). The allegory is structured as a hierarchical progression from cave to Idea, from mother to father via the world. In the last scene of the allegory only the Realm of the Idea remains, suggesting for Irigaray the elision of the mother from the scene of representation - woman is now “off-stage”: “Éclipse de la mère, du lieu (du)

devenir, qui soutient de sa non-représentation, voire sa (dé)négation, l'être absolu attribué au père."²³

The three elements of the allegory, the Idea, the world and the cavern are also reformulated as the same, the 'other of the same', and 'the other of the other', and, as Whitford explains: "this schema later becomes expanded in subsequent texts..."²⁴, as follows:

- 'The Realm of the Idea', which is equated with the economy of the same, is reached by a complex system of mirrors, copies and echoes, and as such comes to represent the self-referential, "homosexual" world of men.
- 'The world' functions as man's other, his "home-base", or "base-camp", that other space from which he can "take off", and which he leaves behind when he ascends towards the transcendental. Irigaray makes a connection between that "home-base" and the "home", the private, domestic world of women, and so the 'other of the same' comes to represent the position of women in patriarchy.
- 'The cavern' is equated with the 'other of the other', a space-time that woman can call her own, and that is not identified or defined in relation to the same or to the economy of the same: "[It is] an as yet non-existent female homosexual economy, women-amongst-themselves, love of self on the side of women."²⁵

What Irigaray also draws from the myth is the same's *unacknowledged dependence on the other* or man's unacknowledged dependence on woman. Man needs his "home base", he cannot progress toward the Realm of the Transcendental, without a starting-point, a place where he can make his journey from and return to for material sustenance. His identity, his capacity for transcendence are conditional on the support of the same. Thus, underlying the disappearance of the mother from the final scene of the allegory, is the disavowal of the material support required by man to ascend to the transcendental.

²³ Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l'autre femme*, p. 383.

²⁴ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 104.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

Finally, Irigaray wishes to challenge the fundamental separation which underlies this scene of representation, the separation of the spiritual and material worlds, with its underlying positive/negative, male/female connotation, a separation which she reformulates as existing between the “sensible” and the “transcendental”.

What Irigaray is looking for is a way for women to be able to access the transcendental while not denying their corporeality, a state of being that she refers to as the “sensible transcendental”. In the next section we will see how Irigaray’s idea of a female divinity represents one of the ways in which she believes this could be achieved.

A female genealogy

Il nous manque, nous sexuées selon notre genre, un Dieu à partager, un verbe à partager et à devenir. Définies comme substance-mère, souvent obscure, voire occulte, du verbe des hommes, il nous manque notre *sujet*, notre *substantif*, notre *verbe*, nos *prédicats*: notre phrase élémentaire, notre rythme de base, notre identité morphologique, notre incarnation générique, notre généalogie.²⁶

Both Irigaray’s critique of the symbolic, and her blueprint for the future or “symbolic solutions”, are voiced in a variety of discursive formulations. Her various projections, whether expressed in relation to the philosophical, the sexual, the social or the religious, can be assembled under the umbrella of her idea of a maternal genealogy²⁷.

Irigaray does not believe that a maternal genealogy should replace the paternal one, but rather that there should be two genealogies coexisting in relation to each other (“Mais, si leur projet visait simplement à renverser l’ordre des choses ... l’histoire reviendrait finalement au même. Au phallocentrisme.”²⁸). The paternal genealogy, based on *sacrifice* (on the child’s renunciation of the mother in favour of the father) sacrifices women’s relations to their mothers, to their daughters and to each other.

²⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et Parentés*, p. 83.

²⁷ In this section I refer to Irigaray’s blueprint for a new symbolic. Later, in the main body of the text, I will refer to her work on the “forgotten mystery of *forgotten* genealogies” published in *Le Temps de la différence*.

²⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*, p. 32.

This founding notion of *sacrifice* is countered in Irigaray's thinking, by a maternal genealogy, which is based on the notion of *fertility* (where the mother agrees to be fertile *with* her daughter²⁹):

Comment affirmer ensemble ces valeurs élémentaires, ces fécondités naturelles, les célébrer, les garder, les conserver, les monnayer en devenant ou restant femmes?³⁰

This idea of fertility provides a way of restoring for women the *specificity of their gender*, providing them with a marker of difference. So what may appear at first reading to represent nothing but an exhortation to motherhood, is in fact, as Whitford explains, the very opposite:

On the contrary it is a picture which allows women an identity *distinct* from motherhood ... So *fertility* should be read ... as a counter term to *sacrifice*, to indicate the possibility of a different mode of social organisation in which woman's difference is represented, symbolized, and codified.³¹

Irigaray also provides a way of restoring for women the *specificity of their sexuality*, countering Freud's specular theory (and the singularity of the male organ) by a tactile notion of sexuality celebrating the plurality of the two lips:

La femme "se touche" tout le temps, sans que l'on puisse d'ailleurs le lui interdire, car son sexe est fait de deux lèvres qui s'embrassent continûment. Ainsi, en elle, elle est déjà deux - mais non divisibles en un(e)s - qui s'affectent Le *un* de la forme, de l'individu, du sexe, du nom propre, du sens propre ... supplante, en écartant et divisant, ce toucher d'*au moins deux* (lèvres) qui maintient la femme en contact avec elle-même, mais sans discrimination possible de ce qui se touche."³²

The two lips stand as a figure not only for plurality but also for contiguity, for that which touches, associates or combines. The idea of contiguity is integrated into Irigaray's vision of a woman's sociality, which is based on *contiguous* relations between women. In this social context, the figure of the two lips operates as a symbol of what Whitford calls "vertical and horizontal relationships between

²⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et Parentés*, p. 9.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 95.

³¹ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the feminine*, p. 183.

women” (vertical relationships being those between mothers and daughters, and horizontal relationships being those between women), which could be achieved by women within their own genealogy: “Contiguity, then is a figure for the vertical and horizontal relationships between women, the maternal genealogy and the relation of sisterhood (since there are two pairs of two lips, of which one pair - the mouth - can be seen as horizontal, and the other pair - the labia - as vertical, each representing each other). It stands for women’s sociality, love of self on the woman’s side, the basis of a different form of social organization and a different economy.”³³

No female genealogy would be complete without its own female divinity. The possibility of a female divinity would provide a horizon of “otherness” or becoming for women. Women would therefore be able both to assume their reinstated bodies as well as accessing the divine or transcendental. As a result, the split between the corporeal and the transcendental would be broken down, enabling accession to the “sensible transcendental”.

The maternal genealogy not only allows for the restoration of female subjectivity and relations between women, it also permits the restoration of relations between women and men: “Passage oblitéré entre le dehors et le dedans, le haut et le bas, l’intelligible et le sensible, le “père” et la “mère”.³⁴ The passage between the two is now reopened as Irigaray leaves us with a vision of two separate, different genealogies, in relation with each other. The differences between these two genealogies have been reformulated in various ways (see columns below):

similarity	contiguity
metaphor	metonymy
condensation	displacement
paradigm	syntagm
system	discourse
code	context

³² Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, pp. 24, 26.

³³ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the feminine*, p. 180-81.

³⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l'autre femme*, p. 431.

finite

infinite

.....

Lacan

Irigaray

male

female

sacrifice

fertility

substitution

contiguity

identification

identification

paternal genealogy

maternal genealogy³⁵

In the main part of the text I will refer in particular to the opposition between sacrifice and fertility, substitution and contiguity, and show how this opposition can be applied to the narrative development of *Ombre sultane*. In the next section I will give a résumé of the content of *Ombre sultane*, before applying Irigaray's theories to the novel.

A double-take on the novel

"Difference", the slogan of Irigaray's philosophical campaign, is often expressed in terms of duality. For Irigaray duality is the key to establishing difference and relation between subjectivities. The danger of indifferentiation (of the two becoming one) which often threatens relationships between two women is countered by the notion of duality (of the two engaging in *mutual* giving *and* receiving), expressed as "rejouer ou redoubler deux fois amourement ce qu'elles sont".³⁶

The idea of duality also pervades the content, the thematics and, to some extent, the form of *Ombre sultane*:

Preface: The most obvious example of duality is presented to us in the preface. Here we have two women - an ex-wife (Isma) who *was* married to, and a newly-wed (Hajila) who *is* married to, the same man "l'homme" (as he is referred to). Isma, the ex-wife, has arranged for Hajila to marry her ex-husband and to take over the

³⁵ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 179.

³⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris, Minuit 1984), p. 103.

running of house and family. In the preface these two women also double as “l’ombre” and “la sultane”, anticipating Djébar’s mirroring of the story of Isma and Hajila with that of the two sisters, Schéhérazade and Dinarzade of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*.

Part 1: Isma, the narrator, alternates between first and second person narration, between describing her own experiences (saying “je”), and addressing Hajila, (saying “tu” to Hajila). While the first person narrative (Isma sections) describes Isma’s own past marriage to “l’homme”, the second person narrative (“Hajila sections”) follows Hajila’s present experiences as her ex-husband’s new bride, as seen through Isma’s eyes. Towards the end of Part 1, Isma starts to combine first and second person narration.

Hajila sections: In these sections Isma’s narration operates like the eyes and ears of a secret camera, following and recording Hajila’s every movement, filling the text-screen with the images and sounds of Hajila’s daily life. Hajila emerges as a “Cinderella” figure, poor, submissive and illiterate, whose days are spent looking after the needs of the new French-speaking³⁷ family she has inherited (Isma’s ex-husband and two children, only one of whom, Mériem, turns out to be Isma’s) who largely ignore her. The two key developments in this section are Hajila’s decision to make clandestine outings outside her new home, and the rape she later suffers at the hands of “l’homme.”

Isma sections: Whereas Hajila is taking forays into the outside world, journeying through space, Isma journeys through the past, delving into the history of a marriage, recounting both its construction (here the celebration of physical intimacy contrasts with the physical abuse described in the Hajila sections) and, to a lesser extent, its disintegration. The relationship between Isma and her mother-in-law is also given prominence in this section.

Combined first and second person narratives: In Chapter XI, “Le Retour”, there is unity of time and space as Isma’s story is fast-forwarded to the present of Hajila’s

³⁷ Presumably, “l’homme” and Mériem are Algerian, but Nazim, the product of “his” liaison with a French woman, is therefore only half Algerian. All three communicate with each other in French.

narrative. Isma has now returned to the city where Hajila and “l’homme” reside. The duality here finds its expression in the revelation of shared experience of male violence, as Isma reveals that she too has suffered at the hands of “l’homme”.

Part 2: In Part 2 Djebbar suspends the story of Hajila, and delves into Isma’s past. Isma’s memories of childhood are alternated with snapshots of the lives of other women from her past. The relationships between these women, characterised by bitter rivalry, are contrasted with the relationship between Schéhérazade and Dinarzade, who represent the ideal of sisterhood.

Part 3: In Part 3 the story of Hajila is taken up again as the two protagonists finally meet face to face. Isma gives Hajila the key to her apartment (and to her escape from “l’homme”) before the two women take their separate paths, Hajila into the outside world, Isma resolving to return to the traditional village of her childhood.

I suggest that the narrative development of *Ombre sultane* can be viewed as a series of shifts of consciousness in which the relationship between Isma and Hajila moves from what Irigaray describes as a *sacrificial* male economy of relations towards a female economy of relations. I will examine these shifts of consciousness, in relation to Irigaray’s theories, with two aims in mind:

- To show that the shift towards a female economy of relations takes place as a result of the *acknowledgement of the feminine-unconscious*, and;
- To evaluate to what extent Djebbar’s vision of a female economy of relations (or sisterhood) compares to *Irigaray’s ideal of subject-to-subject relations*.

Part 1 - Moving away from a masculine economy of relations

Hajila sections

The psychoanalytical model

In *Spéculum*, Irigaray articulates the unthinkable question “What if the other had an other?” In *Ombre sultane*, it seems at first that the other (woman) does have an other (woman). The story gives narrative form to the quip sometimes voiced by women: “I

wish I had a wife". Isma wants "a wife", and then acquires a "wife" to look after her children and their home.

However, by examining Isma's relation to Hajila, it becomes clear that Hajila does not represent 'the other of the other' (a position which Irigaray equates with "an as yet non-existent female homosexual economy, women-amongst-themselves, love of self on the side of women"³⁸), but rather represents '*the other of the same*' (a position which Irigaray equates with the role of women within patriarchy). Within this second configuration, Isma represents 'the same', taking on the male role, as she oppresses her female 'other', casting on to Hajila the material responsibilities of a domestic situation she herself (Isma) has rejected.

What Irigaray finds in the [Plato's] myth is an imaginary primal scene ... which has attempted to remove the mother The effect is that the male function takes over and incorporates the female function, *leaving woman outside the scene, but supporting it, a condition of representation.*"³⁹

The dynamics between the same and the other as put forward in Irigaray's reading of Plato's myth are also at work in the relation between Isma and Hajila. Here it is Hajila who is in the supporting role, and it is *her* subjugation which is the condition for Isma's new-found freedom. Here too we find that the same's (Isma's) sense of self, her subjectivity, her freedom, *is conditional on* the repression of the other (Hajila): "Elle s'est voulue marieuse de son propre mari; elle a cru, par naïveté, se libérer ainsi à la fois du passé d'amour et du présent arrêté" (p. 9).

What Irigaray returns to again and again in her interpretation of the myth is the obliteration of the relationship between the two (same and other): "Passage oblitéré entre le dehors et le dedans, le haut et le bas, l'intelligible et le sensible, le "père" et la "mère".⁴⁰ In order for there to be a relationship between the same and its other, the maternal-feminine must be reinstated into the scene of representation - the other must be acknowledged.

³⁸ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 104.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 106. [My emphasis]

⁴⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l'autre femme*, p. 431.

For this to happen in *Ombre sultane*, for a relationship to be possible between the same (Isma) and the other (Hajila), Isma must first acknowledge her other, Hajila. This process of recognition is set in motion the moment that Isma starts to say “tu” to Hajila. For as soon as Isma (literally) *addresses* Hajila, as soon as she addresses her *other*, that unconscious other (Hajila) begins to be released.

According to Irigaray’s studies of the enunciative structures of men and women in psychoanalytical sessions, women tend towards the mimetic “you” pole (which is indicative of a desire for validation) whereas men tend towards the self-referential “I” pole.⁴¹ For sexual difference to be realised, women would have to assume an “I” in their own right (as a mark of their separate subjectivity) and men would have to venture out of the closed world of the “I” towards the “you”.⁴² This polarisation reflects the respective subject/object positions of men and women in the symbolic.

Returning to Djébar’s narrative, we note that Isma starts off in the “I” or masculine pole of enunciation. She is concerned about her self and her own liberation. For her to move out of the masculine economy of relations, she needs to (and does) venture towards the “you” pole of enunciation. Although Isma is saying “tu” to Hajila as early as Chapter 1, it is not until Chapter XII that Isma recalls the precise moment when this enunciative shift occurs, a moment which coincides with her decision to return to Algeria to reclaim her daughter:

Insomnies de minuit, siestes le jour suivant: ma mémoire retrouve un halètement ancien. “C’est là que j’ai fini par dire “tu” à l’étrangère; toi, Hajila, que d’autres imaginent ma rivale.” (p. 89)

Given that the transformation of the relationship between Hajila and Isma operates on the basis of (Isma) addressing the unconscious (other, Hajila), it is possible to draw a parallel between the mechanics of Djébar’s narrative and the mechanics of psychoanalysis as applied to Irigaray’s work, both of which operate on the principle of *the release of the feminine-unconscious*, and both of which can be assimilated into a psychoanalytical model.

⁴¹ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et Parentés*, p. 188.

⁴² Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 35.

“Et si l’inconscient était à la fois le résultat de censures, de refoulements, imposés dans et par une certaine histoire, *mais aussi* un encore à advenir, la *réserve d’un à venir*.”⁴³ For Irigaray, the unconscious is a site where change can take place, psychoanalysis is the medium in which shifts of consciousness can be effected, and the word, or “la parole”, is the catalyst which sets the whole procedure in motion: “A la parole de l’autre revient de débrider ce qui ainsi se sclérose.”⁴⁴ Applying this principle to Irigaray’s work, we find Irigaray in the role of the psychoanalyst whose “words” operates as the mechanism that unbinds the feminine-unconscious of her analysands, the Fathers of Western philosophy.

Adapting this psychoanalytical model to *Ombre sultane*, I suggest that Isma functions as analysand, that Hajila functions as her unconscious (as the unacknowledged maternal-feminine), and that the writing functions as “la parole” which unbinds the repressed maternal-feminine. I will now address the text to show how this process of unbinding begins...

The empty gestures of an enforced everydayness...

Dépourvue d’idéalité autonome, la femme-mère ne risque-t-elle pas d’être réduite à une fiction? Purs gestes *d’une quotidienneté imposée*, image unique ou plurielle, mécanique ou rêve, *ombre*, voire *fantôme*...⁴⁵

In Part 1 Isma observes a woman whose life is punctuated by the “empty gestures of an enforced everydayness”. Like the eye of the camera, Isma’s words rove over the sounds and sights of the mundane routines of Hajila’s everyday life: “Tu débarrasses la table Tu plies la nappe, tu essuies le bois clair de la table; tu poses le chiffon humide...” (p. 15). However, as Isma’s words envelop Hajila, these gestures are no longer *empty* but are imbued with the projections of Isma’s sympathy.

Isma’s observant eye records not only Hajila’s actions but hints at the emotions that accompany them: “Tes yeux sont embués. Tu renifles ... tu regardes tes mains vides ...” (p. 15). The description of simple tasks reveals the sympathy and sensitivity of

⁴³ Luce Irigaray, *Parler n’est jamais neutre* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), pp. 255-56.

⁴⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Parler n’est jamais neutre*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Parler n’est jamais neutre*, p. 295. [My emphasis]

the observer to the other: "Une tasse, sous tes doigts soudain fébriles, se fêle contre la faïence de l'évier" (p. 15). The insistent repetition of the "tu" and the total absence of the "I" in this first chapter mark a dramatic transition away from the "I" pole of enunciation (away from the self), and an intense concentration on the other as Isma becomes more aware of how the "other half lives".

All Isma's observations point to Hajila's deep unhappiness, which is hinted at in the first sentence: "Hajila, une douleur sans raison t'a saisie, ce matin, dans la cuisine qui sera le lieu du mélodrame" (p. 15). This is reinforced by the repeated references to Hajila crying, in the morning as her husband is getting ready to leave, when she is left alone in the house and when the children return from school, suggesting that she is in a constant state of melancholy

Tes yeux sont inondés de larmes Tes larmes reprennent, s'égouttent sur l'évier... (pp. 15, 16)

De nouveau, ton visage s'inonde de larmes" (p. 17)

Tu pleures maman, ce n'est pas bien!" (p. 18)

In this portrait of unhappiness, Hajila's alienation from her husband soon becomes apparent. His refusal to acknowledge either her tears or her words, casts her into a lonely silence:

Qu'as-tu?

Sa voix saccadée a traversé l'espace. "Il" se tient sur le seuil, non loin.

- Je pleure!

Tu réponds sans te retourner. Tu attends. Nul écho. (p. 16)

The sense of alienation from the new family she has acquired is later reinforced by the revelation of her fundamental ignorance about her new husband and stepchildren: "Ces enfants, de quelle mère, de quelle étrangère sont-ils?" (p. 18). "Veuf ou divorcé avec deux enfants, qu'il avait eus d'une épouse ou de deux, comment savoir, qui allait le lui demander?" (p. 22).

The sustained focus of Isma's words on Hajila's movements has the effect of revealing the repetitiveness and emptiness of Hajila's life: "Tu plies la nappe, tu essuies le bois clair de la table; tu poses le chiffon humide, tu regardes tes mains

vides, tes mains de ménagère active” (p. 15). Her alienation from her self is reinforced not only by her detachment from the objects that surround her, but also by her alienation from her own body: “Ta main, inerte. Ne pas fermer le robinet. Écouter les gouttes d’eau... Main sur le robinet de cuivre: ‘ta’ main. Front sur un bras nu tendu: ‘ton’ front, ‘ton’ bras” (p. 16).

The text proceeds as if in slow motion, as if Hajila is going through the motions of living: “Tu as marché jusqu’au lit. Tu refais celui-ci sans en secouer les draps. Mouvement cassé de tes bras. Tu t’assois, lustrant de tes doigts à demi rougis d’un henné passé le couvre-lit rêche, une cotonnade écrue” (p. 17). The slow rhythm of her day comes to an almost complete halt as she becomes completely inert, lifeless “Une heure plus tard, tu t’installes dans la plus petite des chambres. Dame assise: nature morte” (p. 17).

Like Irigaray’s “woman-mother”, Hajila exists as a dream or a shade or a ghost. Although it is Isma who is literally shadowing Hajila, although it is she who is “[l’]ombre derrière la sultane” (p. 9), Hajila too is “l’ombre”, in the sense that she is but a shadow of a person. Further on in the narrative the idea of “la femme-fantôme” is foregrounded from within the text, as Hajila recalls the first time her stepson Nazim talks to her: “Tu te rappelles la première fois où il t’a parlé - tu as tourné la tête pour chercher l’interlocuteur: tu n’existe pas plus qu’un fantôme!” (p. 37). Hajila exists as a mechanism, not only a mechanism to ensure the accomplishment of domestic tasks, but also a mechanism to ensure that the children she has acquired learn Arabic: “Ainsi le sens de ta présence dans ces lieux est vérifiable: tu as été choisie, sans le savoir, comme institutrice à demeure, ‘maîtresse Hajila’” (p. 37).

Isma’s secret ‘camera’ not only follows Hajila’s outward movements, but also has access to her thoughts. Some of these thoughts (like the one quoted above) are expressed in the simple language of an illiterate woman. Others however are articulated in Isma’s voice:

“Vous [les hommes] qui surgissez au soleil! Chaque matin, vous vous rincez à grande eau le visage, les avant-bras, la nuque. Ces ablutions ne préparent pas vos prosternations, non, elles précèdent l’acte de sortir, sortir! ... Vous vous présentez au monde vous les bienheureux! ...”

Ces mots en toi rythment la mélodie du deuil. (p. 17)

This superimposition of Isma's voice onto Hajila's thoughts reinforces the impression of Hajila's lack of subjectivity. She (Isma) is speaking for Hajila - Hajila cannot speak for herself. Her language is caught up in the linguistic code of the other. On the level of the story Hajila is also rendered silent because she cannot understand French, the language in which her new family communicate: "‘Face de la douleur’, tu murmures ces mots en langue arabe, pour toi seule, pour toi muette” (p. 17).

Although Isma's observations reveal Hajila's general unhappiness, one phrase in particular points to recent circumstances as the specific cause of her misery, and, by implication, to Isma herself as the unspoken cause of Hajila's present unhappiness: "‘Je n'ai pas pleuré depuis tant d'années!’ ” (p. 16). Isma has placed Hajila in her new circumstances in order to enable herself to escape from them. She has vacated a space which Hajila is now occupying. In other words, Isma has substituted Hajila for herself.

According to Irigaray, the masculine economy of relations is based on substitution or sacrifice, on the sacrifice of the mother: "In Lacan's economy, the founding sacrifice which underlies the social order is a relation of metaphor and substitution. It is the male position in the Oedipus complex, the instinctual renunciation made by the boy, and the identification with the father."⁴⁶ The status of Isma as a "free-agent" in society depends on Isma substituting or sacrificing the (step)mother Hajila for herself. Their relationship can therefore be viewed as conforming to the sacrificial masculine economy.

As Hajila wanders aimlessly around her new house, and looks into the mirror, Djébar foregrounds the idea of the substitution of one subjectivity for the other: "... ton visage serait-il celui d'une autre?" (p. 15) "... une inconnue qui aurait été ton double" (p. 24). It is not until the end of Part 1, however, that Isma herself consciously acknowledges the fact that she has sacrificed Hajila for her own ends.

⁴⁶ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 180.

Passing from interior to exterior...

... elle [la femme-mère] n'est jamais unifiée dans son insistance ou *existence à défaut de paroles qui l'enveloppent, la couvrent, la situent dans une identité, l'assistent à passer de l'intérieur à l'extérieur d'elle, la revêtent d'elle-même, tel un abri* qui l'accompagne et la protège sans adhérence ni allégeance au monde de l'autre....⁴⁷

As Isma starts to acknowledge her unconscious, as she listens to her other, that other (Hajila) starts to be released into the outside world - that which has been repressed is liberated. And it is Isma's words that effect that movement, it is her words that literally *assist Hajila in passing from interior to exterior*, that literally propel her into the outside world and accompany her first hesitant steps into the streets. The connection between Isma's words and Hajila's movements is reinforced by Isma's emphatic statement: "Tu vas 'sortir' pour la première fois, Hajila dans ton visage entièrement masqué, un seul oeil est découvert ... Tu entres dans l'ascenseur, tu vas déboucher en pleine rue..." (p. 27).

"The task of the other's word is to unbind/loosen what has been petrified."⁴⁸ So Isma's words act as a catalyst for Hajila's hesitant steps into the forbidden outside world. This journey into space is also a journey of self-discovery, the discovery of "an identity, like a shelter that would accompany her, clothe her in herself and protect her without need to cling or give allegiance to the world of the other." Significantly, the process of being *clothed in herself* requires her to remove her "clothes" (her veil) precisely because they are clothes imposed on her by her allegiance to the "world of the other". The process of "unclothing" happens gradually, over a period of time (she starts by pushing the veil away from her face, and ends up by removing the veil altogether) during which her forbidden visits into the outside world become more and more frequent.

⁴⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Parler n'est jamais neutre*, p. 295. [My emphasis]

⁴⁸ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the feminine*, p. 32. *Parler n'est jamais neutre*, p. 15.

Hajila's first steps into the outside world take place in a mixture of fear and exhilaration: "L'oeil en triangle noir regarde à droite, à gauche, encore à droite, puis ... le coeur se met à battre sous le tissu de laine Pouvoir lâcher le bord du drap, regarder, le visage à découvert, et même renverser la tête vers le ciel, comme à dix ans!" (p. 27). She is both overcome with feelings of elation, and overwhelmed by space, by the vast expanses of sea and sky: "Je m'immobilise, puis j'avance, je glisse dans l'azur, je décolle de la terre, je... ô veuves de Mohammed, secourez-moi!" Est-ce, là-bas, la même mer que celle que tu aperçois du balcon de la cuisine? A présent la voici mare géante, proche et lointaine à la fois" (p. 28)

Hajila proceeds in the outside world as if in a dream: "Tu marches, Hajila, baignée par la lumière qui te porte. Qui te sculpte" (p. 28). It is as if Hajila, the ghost woman, is being given form by the outside world. But the dream becomes a nightmare as reality sets in and "Cinderella" hurries home: "Moins d'une heure plus tard, essoufflée, pour avoir presque couru, comme dans une poursuite de cauchemar, tu parviens devant l'immeuble où tu habites" (p. 28).

Hajila's second visit into the forbidden public spaces is prompted by a strong image which both haunts and inspires her. From inside the window of a moving car, she catches sight of a young woman who is laughing and holding a baby in a park - an image which she turns over and over again in her mind:

Le bébé gigote, la femme rit, les bras tendus...

"Et tu rêves:

" Sans voiles, dehors, en train d'aimer son enfant!" Tu reprends:

"Sans voiles dehors, en train..."

"Sans voile, dehors..." (p. 36)

This image has a powerful effect on Hajila and inspires her second foray into the outside world. The power of the image on Hajila's psyche, acting as a catalyst for her propulsion into the outside world, recalls Irigaray's conviction about the importance of public images in helping women move from the private to the public realm:

A qui se soucie aujourd'hui de justice sociale, je propose d'afficher dans tous les lieux publics de belles images figurant le couple mère-fille Ces représentations sont absentes de tous les lieux civils et religieux. Cela

signifie une injustice culturelle facile à réparer Cette restauration culturelle commencera à soigner une perte d'identité individuelle et collective pour les femmes *Elle les assistera à passer du privé au public, de leur famille à la société où elles vivent.*⁴⁹

Hajila too is confronted with “une belle image” (not in the form of a poster but in the form of a picture filling the screen of the car window) of a woman freely inhabiting the outside world, and this image helps her to pass from the interior to the exterior:

Dans le noir où tu plonges, tu vois encore l'inconnue aux cheveux rouges trôner au centre du square, le visage élargi de bonheur.
Surgissant au dehors, tu sens peser sur ton dos le regard du concierge. Tu dévales la première pente de la première rue. (pp. 37-38)

Buoyed by the image of the veil-less woman, Hajila decides to expose even more of her body this time: “Là tu te décides avec violence: “enlever le voile!”. Comme si tu voulais disparaître... ou exploser! ... La laine du voile glisse sur ta chevelure tandis que tu ralentis le pas; tu te représentes ta propre silhouette tête libre, cheveux noirs tirés” (p. 39). Like the hands of a sculptor, the narrative slowly unveils Hajila's face, and then her entire head. Finally, as the whole cloth falls at her feet, it is as if she is reborn: “... toi la nouvelle, toi en train de te muer en une autre” (p. 40).

Hajila's rebirth is short-lived. On the way home she slips into the corridor of a nearby building and transmutes back into Irigaray's “femme-mère-fantôme”: “... mains tremblantes, visage crispé, fermant les yeux de désespoir, créant dans ce noir ton propre noir, tu te réenveloppes du *haïk*! Dehors te revoici fantôme et la colère grisâtre replie ses ailes sous la blancheur du drap” (p. 42).

For Djebbar, and for Irigaray, the passage into the outside world is an important step towards the restoration of female corporeality and the accession to subjectivity. As Hajila's “passes from interior to exterior”, Djebbar foregrounds the connection between her exploration of public spaces and the discovery of her own body-space:

Déshabillée, tu plonges dans la baignoire fumante. Tu contemples ton corps dans la glace, l'esprit inondé des images du dehors, de la lumière du dehors, du jardin-comme-à-la télévision. Les autres continuent à défiler là-bas; tu les

⁴⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Le Temps de la différence*, pp. 27-28.

ressuscites dans l'eau du miroir pour qu'ils fassent cortège à la femme vraiment nue, à Hajila nouvelle qui froidement te dévisage." (p. 43)

Situate her in an identity, like a shelter...

...elle n'est jamais unifiée dans son insistance ou existence à défaut de paroles qui l'enveloppent, la couvrent, *la situent dans une identité*, l'assistent à passer de l'intérieur à l'extérieur d'elle, la revêtent d'elle-même, *tel un abri* qui l'accompagne et la protège sans adhérence ni allégeance au monde de l'autre.⁵⁰

It is Hajila's secret knowledge of the outside world which gives her the strength to overcome the next difficult experience of her life, six months into her marriage: "Le viol, est-ce le viol?" wonders Isma (p. 66). Ironically, this traumatic experience acts as a catalyst to further self-discovery, allowing Hajila "*to situate herself in an identity ... like a shelter*". After the rape, as we will see, Djébar likens Hajila's new-found sense of identity to "une grotte", offering us images which echo Irigaray's association of identity with refuge, and which recall her insistence on the accession to otherness as a pre-condition for that identity.

During the rape, Hajila summons up the images of the outside world, of her new space-time to mentally resist the intrusion of her body space:

Faut-il céder? Non, rappelle-toi les rues, elles s'allongent en toi dans un soleil qui a dissous les nuées; les murs s'ouvrent; arbres et haies glissent. Tu revois l'espace au-dehors où chaque jour tu navigues. Quand le phallus de l'homme te déchire, épée rapide, tu hurles dans le silence, dans ton silence: "non!... non!" ... La déchirure s'étend, les rues déroulées en toi défilent, les ombres des passants reviennent et te dévisagent, chaînes inconnues aux yeux globuleux. (p. 67)

Her ability to survive by drawing strength from her own separate world gives her a new self-confidence:

Ce lendemain du viol, tu ne le crains plus. Il te suffit de te rappeler tes déambulations, ton corps sans puanteur aux jambes, auréolé de la lumière solaire quand tu traversais les espaces de la ville.
La porte claque. Tu retournes à la salle de bains. Sûre de toi. (p. 71)

⁵⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Parler n'est jamais neutre*, p. 295. [My emphasis]

The following day Hajila becomes conscious of her body as a safe-house for herself - it is no longer the territory of man. This discovery takes place in the hammam, a cavern-womb-like space, which can be likened to Irigaray's space for woman, her 'other of the other', where women can "become" and where Hajila now reclaims her body for herself. The image of the cave is then compounded as Hajila's own body becomes a cavern, a shelter in which she can find herself: "Cheveux dénoués et trempés, le dos étalé sur la dalle de marbre brûlant, ventre, sexe et jambes libérés, creuser *une grotte* et au fond, tout au fond, parler enfin à soi-même, l'inconnue" (p. 73) [My emphasis].

As Isma's "unconscious" slowly gains consciousness, as her "paroles" slowly release Hajila into the outside world, it is as if Hajila's subjectivity is slowly coming into being. But as we will see in the "combined narrative sections", the process of release is not yet complete...

Isma sections

... le corps de l'homme devient mur mitoyen de nos antres qu'un même secret habite. (p. 91)

Hajila's journey through space runs in parallel with Isma's journey through time, as she relives the days and nights of her past marriage to the very same "homme". Djébar, like Irigaray, posits man as the dividing-wall between women, creating an interminable rivalry between them. So whereas in the 'Hajila sections', "l'homme" is the dividing-wall between Isma and Hajila, in the 'Isma sections' we discover that this same "homme" has created a dividing wall between Isma and her mother-in-law in the past.

Irigaray relates the fundamental rivalry between women to the mother and daughter's relation to the father. Because both mother and daughter are always in competition for the desire or attention of the father, the two are therefore competing for what she calls "one space". Always in competition for the one, they cannot be two (i.e. in relation to each other):

La place de la mère étant unique, devenir mère supposerait d'occuper ce lieu, sans relation avec elle en ce lieu. L'économie, ici, serait *ou l'une ou l'autre*, ou elle ou je-moi. Pour se faire désirer, aimer de l'homme, il faut évincer la mère, se substituer à elle, l'anéantir pour devenir même. Ce qui détruit la possibilité d'un amour entre mère et fille. Elles sont à la fois complices et rivales pour advenir à l'unique position possible dans le désir de l'homme.⁵¹

In *Ombre sultane*, the mother-daughter rivalry can be transposed to the relationship between Isma and her mother-in-law, both of whom are in competition for the desire of one man, "l'homme". The struggle for supremacy is initially described as operating between Isma and her husband's family: "Longtemps je le cernais de cette manière, je tentais de l'extraire de sa familiarité avec ceux auxquels il est attaché par des liens du sang" (p. 57). It soon becomes obvious, however, that Isma's chief rival is the mother-in-law, "le fantôme maternel", whose image haunts their relationship: "La mère de l'homme, ennemie ou rivale, surgit dans les strates de nos caresses" (pp. 59, 61). In this battle for maternal supremacy, Isma struggles to disempower, to depose the mother-in-law, and to take her place in the affections of her son.

Isma traces this competition with her mother-in-law back to its origin, which she identifies as her mother-in-law's relation to her son, "l'homme", and more particularly to his desire for origin: "Hantise de l'origine, épée droite fichée en l'homme, qui le blesse et le redresse. Moi, je renie la matrone omniprésente" (p. 59). As Isma draws her mother-in-law into conversation, the latter's intense relation with the son is again brought into focus by Isma's surprised echo:

D'un ton incrédule, je m'exclame:

- Tu as allaité ton fils pendant... pendant trois ans? (p. 61)

Irigaray, like Djébar, makes a connection between mother-son relationship, the desire for origin and breast-feeding. Irigaray takes as her starting-point Freud's comments on the way breast-feeding has been equated with love: "Le plus ancien en date des méfaits reprochés à la mère, c'est d'avoir donné trop peu de lait à son enfant, et montré ainsi qu'elle ne l'aimait pas assez."⁵² She then takes the idea further, reading the nostalgia for the maternal breast as a more fundamental symptom of the

⁵¹ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 101.

trauma provoked by separation from the maternal body: "... dernière rupture de contiguïté matérielle avec l'intérieur du corps de la mère."⁵³

For Irigaray hunger for the breast is equated with hunger for the mother: "Il s'agirait d'une faim inavouable de dévorer la mère..."⁵⁴ For man this desire can be resolved by transferring it on to another woman (mother-substitute): "Alors, si l'on est garçon on désirera, dès que phallique, retourner à l'origine, se retourner vers l'origine. Soit: posséder la mère, entrer dans la mère, ce lieu originel, pour rétablir la continuité avec, et voir, et savoir, ce qui s'y passe. Et, encore, s'y reproduire."⁵⁵ The woman, however, has no way of resolving her *own* desire for origin and is reduced to becoming the site of *his* desire (for origin):

... elle ne (se) représentera pas "son" rapport à "son" origine; elle ne rentrera plus jamais dans la mère Laisée au *vide*, au *manque* de toute représentation, ...de son désir (d')origine. Lequel en passera, dès lors, par le désir-discours-loi du désir de l'homme: *tu seras ma femme-mère, ma femme si tu veux, tu peux, être (comme) ma mère* = tu seras pour moi la possibilité de répéter-représenter-reproduire-m'approprier le (mon) rapport à l'origine.⁵⁶

For Irigaray then, woman's inability to resolve her own desire for origin results in her substituting for the (man's) mother, inscribing herself into his desire, and alienating herself from her own desiring economy. Returning to *Ombre sultane*, we find Isma willingly responding to the male imperative: "Tu seras ma femme-mère". She too is willing and able to become "la femme-mère" in order to prise the unique place of the mother from her mother-in-law, in order to attain the unique position of *his* desire. Djébar describes the struggle between the two women in terms reminiscent of a tug of war:

Dans l'autre maternel, nous nous réinstallons, moi, l'épouse aux antennes inaltérées, lui, le fils que je tire plus loin, plus loin... J'ai recréé sa naissance ou je l'ai engloutie, je ne sais. Mais je t'en ai dépouillée, ô mère devant laquelle je m'incline, à laquelle je me lie, mais que j'écarte enfin de mon amour. (p. 62)

⁵² Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l'autre femme*, p. 44.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 46, 47. Italics at end my emphasis.

In this graphic illustration of the woman/wife taking on the role of “femme-mère”, we find Isma enabling “l’homme” to re-enter the maternal womb, and allowing him to be born again in yet another act of substitution:

‘L’amour de la mère du côté féminin ne devrait ou ne pourrait s’exercer que sur le mode de la *substitution*? D’un prendre la place de? Inconsciemment teinté de haine?’⁵⁷

According to Irigaray, the answer is yes. The mother occupies what she calls “a unique place”, so to occupy that place is to depose the previous occupant, cutting off any possibility of relation with her.⁵⁸ The suffused hostility which, according to Irigaray, characterises the mother-daughter relation, resurfaces in Djébar’s narrative. For while Isma’s confrontation with her mother-in-law begins with Isma’s declaration of love (“Tu es belle! Et je t’aime!” p. 61), it ends with a recognition that her love is being withdrawn, precisely *because* she has won the battle, *because* she has substituted herself for her mother-in-law: “Mais je t’en ai dépouillée, ô mère devant laquelle je m’incline, à laquelle je me lie, mais que j’écarte enfin de mon amour.” (p 62).

The “Isma sections” present a whole landscape of reconciliations and ruptures, not only between Isma and her mother-in-law, but between Isma and “l’homme”. Here there is a dance of desire and withdrawal, of pregnant intimacies and silent struggles, and the vagaries of physical passion which contrast starkly with the dark revelations of physical violence to follow in the combined narrative sections.

Combined narrative sections

Introduction

The last two chapters of Part 1 (XII and XIII) operate as a cross-roads, as the two stories (Isma’s and Hajila’s) unite in time and space, and as first and second person narration start to alternate within (rather than between) chapters. Hajila and Isma’s divergent personal histories also come to a meeting-point here as Hajila’s present

⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 100.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 101.

comes to repeat Isma's past. Tragically, this meeting-point is represented by a shared experience of violence as we discover that Isma, like Hajila, has experienced physical abuse at the hands of "l'homme".

In these last two chapters we witness two battles, not only the physical confrontation between Hajila and "l'homme", but also a psychological struggle between Isma and Hajila. Although Isma's unconscious other is gradually being released (into the outside world), that other (Hajila) still exists as a projection of Isma's thoughts rather than a separate subjectivity in her own right. In order for that subjectivity to emerge, in order for the relation to move out of the sacrificial masculine economy, Isma first has to acknowledge the "founding act of sacrifice", in other words to acknowledge the fact that she has substituted Hajila in her place.

Escape from the sacrificial economy...

C'est toujours moi qui te parle, Hajila. Comme si, en vérité, je te créais. Une ombre que ma voix lève. Une ombre-soeur? ... Plus les mots me devancent, plus mon présent se disperse; et ta forme s'impose. (p. 91)

The opening words of Chapter XIII reveal that Isma is caught between two ways of relating to Hajila. On the one hand she visualises Hajila as a projection of her self: "Comme si, en vérité, je te créais. Une ombre que ma voix lève." On the other hand, Isma is aware that change is taking place, and that, as her words take effect ("plus les mots me devancent"), the projection is starting to acquire a shape, a form or subjectivity of its own: "et ta forme s'impose". In this sense, the relation is moving away from what Irigaray terms "une intuition de l'autre ... projective ou égoïste"⁵⁹ (in which the other is merely a projection of the self) towards a differentiated love which acknowledges the other's alterity: "[un] amour du même que moi, posé et maintenu hors de moi dans sa différence..."⁶⁰

In the remainder of this chapter, Djebbar describes the incident which provokes Isma to recognise that her relation with Hajila is based on an act of substitution. A series

⁵⁹ Ibid. , p. 111.

⁶⁰ Ibid. , p. 98.

of events leads up to the act of recognition, starting with "l'homme" discovering Hajila's clandestine outings and subjecting her to an interrogation session.

As soon as "l'homme" starts interrogating Hajila, his words strike a chord in Isma. Memories of her own past flow into her consciousness, and, for the first time, she inserts herself directly into Hajila's story: "Comme toi, j'ai vécu cinquante débuts, cinquante instructions de procès, j'ai affronté cinquante chefs d'accusation!" (p. 94). But it is not until "l'homme" is about to strike Hajila, it is not until she realises that history will repeat itself ("car il frappera..." p. 94) that Isma realises the full consequence of her decision to substitute Hajila in her place.

At this point it is as if Isma suddenly makes a connection, not only between her ex-husband's past pattern of behaviour and his present conduct (as she senses the inevitability of the violence to come) but between her past life and Hajila's current predicament. It is now that Isma finally recognises the act of substitution, finally acknowledging that Hajila is suffering in her stead: "Le soleil te regarde, ô Hajila, toi qui me remplaces cette nuit" (p. 94). And, just as Isma makes this acknowledgement, the past does repeat itself before her very eyes:

Il interrogeait, procureur de la nuit et des autres "Qui allais-tu rejoindre dehors, avec qui parlais-tu dans les squares, quel inconnu, quel ami ancien ou nouveau t'accompagnait et dans quelles promenades?.. Quel fard choisissais-tu, quelle jupe sous le voile portais-tu et pourquoi, quelle robe de couleur violente?" (p. 95)

Hajila's words of explanation strike a raw nerve in "l'homme", and precipitate the first act of physical violence:

"J'aimais enlever le voile dans une ruelle, quand personne ne passait, ensuite marcher nue!"

Il a frappé au mot "nue". (p. 95)

Hajila's words also strike another chord in Isma. As if unable to contain herself, she reinserts herself once again into the narrative, her voice-over overriding the soundtrack, muffling Hajila's cries of pain: "Ô ma soeur des bidonvilles, ô ma suivante du malheur inextricable, quand, adolescente, j'ai rencontré cet homme, c'était 'nue' que je déambulais!" (p. 95). For the first time Isma addresses Hajila

directly as sister, and, for the first time, her words do not report but echo Hajila's. So not only has Isma compelled Hajila to follow in her footsteps but she has done so knowing (and now finally acknowledging) that tragedy would be inevitable: "ô ma suivante du malheur inextricable" (p. 95).

It is this act of recognition that will enable the relationship between Isma and Hajila to be propelled out of the sacrificial masculine economy of relations into another mode of relations, a transition that will enable Hajila to step outside Isma's mind and emerge as a separate subjectivity "in its difference", a transition that will not take place until Part 3 (where Hajila's story is taken up again), but which is foreshadowed, in Part 2, in the relation between Schéhérazade and Dinarzade.

Part 2 - Towards a feminine economy of relations

Introduction

Both Irigaray and Djebbar are concerned with the negative effect of the sacrificial patriarchal economy of relations on the relations between women, and both point the way to another, positive model of women-to-women relations. But whereas Irigaray presents us with a philosophical model of a female sociality, here in Part 2, Djebbar presents us with a literary one. For Djebbar's reinterpretation of the story of *Les Mille et Une Nuits* provides us with not a symbolic but a mythical horizon of sisterhood towards which women can aspire. In the first part of Part 2, I will compare Djebbar's "horizon" of sisterhood with Irigaray's blueprint for relations between women.

Part 2 continues with Isma's narration, which alternates between her memories of her own childhood/adolescence, and her memories of the lives of other women. It is as if that having opened herself up to one "other" (Hajila), Isma now becomes open to all the "other others" of her past: "Deux décennies plus tard, l'amertume de ces femmes m'atteint enfin." (p. 88).

All the stories of women in Part 2 describe relations between women which reflect this bitterness, and which are characterised by rivalry and hatred, a theme which is familiar in Irigaray's writing. Before proceeding to the theme of rivalry, I will refer

to Fatima Mernissi's work (*Sexe, idéologie, Islam*⁶¹) which examines the mechanics of repression in an Arab society, relating her conclusions both to Isma's stories of women, and to Irigaray's analysis of repression from a Western perspective. Meanwhile, we return to Djébar's variation on *Les Mille et Une Nuits*.

Sisterhood versus a female sociality

"It should not be assumed that the sacrificial is inevitable; it corresponds too closely to the male imaginary. An exploration of symbolic alternatives to sacrifice should be made."⁶² In Part 2 of *Ombre sultane*, Djébar does not assume that the *sacrificial economy*, in which Isma and Hajila's relationship *first* operates, is inevitable - she, like Irigaray, believes that there is another, better way for women to relate to each other⁶³.

The story of Schéhérazade provides a graphic illustration of the *sacrifice* of women in a patriarchal economy. Taking this idea of a female sacrifice to the very extreme, the women in the story find themselves literally suspended between life and death. The story of *Les Mille et Une Nuits* provides a mechanism for Djébar to expose the workings of patriarchy (based on the sacrifice of the other/woman/"sultane") and to illustrate another economy of relations which *challenges* the notion of sacrifice.

In Djébar's revision of the story of *Les Mille et Une Nuits* the sultan fades into the background as Djébar highlights the relationship between the two women, and the role of the less famous sister, Dinarzade, in particular. Her aim, as she clearly states, is to reinstate the importance of Dinarzade's role: "Éclairer Dinarzade de la nuit!" (p.104).

Djébar opens Part 2 with an epigraph from Mardrus's translation of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*. The passage quoted in the epigraph then resurfaces immediately afterwards, in the first chapter of Part 2, but this time without quotation marks, and with a short

⁶¹ Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, idéologie, Islam* (Paris: Tièrce, 1983), trans. Diane Brower and Anne-Marie Pelletier, p. 9.

⁶² Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 147. This quotation is taken from a list of what Whitford regards as "the main points of Irigaray's discussion on religion." (p.147).

⁶³ At the end of the novel, as we will see, Djébar revises her position vis-à-vis the patriarchal economy.

insert of Djébar's own writing included. Appearing to mimic Irigaray's approach (mimicking her mimicry of the philosophers), Djébar weaves her own writing into the citation (now quoted without quotation marks) so that, as in the case of Irigaray's writing, it is difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends.

In the original passage (in quotation marks) Schéhérazade addresses Dinarzade directly, asking for help, but Dinarzade's reply is omitted - the story takes her assent for granted. In Djébar's version she re-quotes the formal request for help but slips in a sentence which foregrounds Dinarzade's active participation in the plan and her eager willingness to help:

Original version:

“Ma chère soeur, j’ai besoin de votre secours dans une affaire très importante; je vous prie de ne me le pas refuser. Mon père va me conduire chez le sultan pour être son épouse!...
Dès que je serai devant le sultan, je le supplierai de permettre que vous couchiez dans la chambre nuptiale...” (etc.) (p. 101)

Djébar's version:

- Ma chère soeur, commence Schéhérazade, j’ai besoin de votre secours dans une affaire très importante.. Mon père va me conduire chez le sultan pour être son épouse!

Et Dinarzade consent avant même que la demande s’explique.

- Dès que je serai devant le sultan (etc.) (p. 103) [My emphasis]

So while Irigaray reads between the lines in order to pry out the repressed maternal-feminine, Djébar shines a torch between the lines (“Le féminin étant dès lors à déchiffrer comme inter-dit: dans les signes ou entre eux, entre des significations réalisées, entre les lignes...”⁶⁴), in order to light up the forgotten sister figure who has been relegated to the shadow lands. Later in the passage, Djébar again shines her torch, this time under the sultan's bed, showing up the sister-figure :

En tout cas, Dinarzade, la soeur, va veiller tout près: elle côtoiera l'étreinte; elle contempera la fête sensuelle, ou du moins l'écouterà. Et la sultane sera

⁶⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l'autre femme*, p. 20.

sauvée pour un jour encore, pour un deuxième, parce qu'elle invente certes, mais d'abord parce que sa soeur a veillé et l'a réveillée." (p. 103)

Djebar thus shifts the emphasis from Schéhérazade's role in saving her (own) life, to Dinarzade's role in the "rescue-operation". In Djebar's eyes, it is Dinarzade who has the starring role in the scene - Schéhérazade is saved "parce qu'elle invente certes, mais *d'abord* parce que sa soeur a veillé et l'a réveillée."

Relating this story to that of Isma and Hajila, it first seems as if a clear parallelism can be drawn between Isma's role as Dinarzade (Isma the helper who comes to her sister Hajila's rescue, as Isma will do in Part 3) and Hajila's role as Schéhérazade (the new bride who needs to be rescued from a tragic destiny). This apparent parallelism is reinforced by Isma's subsequent resolve to help Hajila, which is inspired by Dinarzade's example: "Aujourd'hui, pour secourir une concubine, je m'imagine sous le lit; éveilleuse et solitaire, je déploie l'image proférée autrefois" (p. 113).

However, it becomes apparent that Isma not only identifies with Dinarzade but *also* identifies with Schéhérazade (as fellow narrator/storyteller), when she wonders whether her "paroles", like those of "la sultane", have the power to save: "Le récit de la sultane des aubes sauvera-t-il l'une de ces opprimées?" (p. 113). So it seems that Isma identifies not only with the helper (Dinarzade) but also with the victim (Schéhérazade).

What Djebar is in fact showing is that there is no easy parallelism between Dinarzade/Isma and Schéhérazade/Hajila, helper/helped. For *both* Schéhérazade and Dinarzade contribute to the deferral of the "death sentence" (one by staying awake, the other by talking) and *both* women are potential victims. It is not only Schéhérazade's life that is at stake here, but also Dinarzade's, who is also a potential victim: "Pour le polygame, la consanguine de l'épouse est interdite, tout au moins tant que sa femme est vivante" (p. 103). *Both* women help *each other* and *both* women need *each other's* help.

Both this idea of reciprocity (of both women helping each other), and the language used to express it, strongly resonates with Irigarayan undertones. Djebar sums up the

message of the story in the last sentence of the chapter: "Et notre peur à toutes aujourd'hui se dissipe, puisque la sultane est double" (p.104). In "L'amour du même, l'amour de l'Autre", Irigaray outlines her idea of the necessary requirements for a positive relation between women, echoing Djébar's affirmation of reciprocal duality:

Pour établir, ou rendre possible l'amour d'elles, et du féminin entre elles, les femmes devraient nécessairement rejouer ou redoubler deux fois amoureusement ce qu'elles sont. Soit:

- l'amour de *l'enveloppe nourrissante* externe et interne, interne et externe, en ses peaux et muqueuses;
- l'amour du *corps*: et de ce corps qu'elles donnent et de ce corps qu'elles (se) redonnent.

Il faut qu'elles s'aiment en tant que mères et d'un amour maternel, en tant que filles et d'un amour de fille. *Les deux*.⁶⁵

What Irigaray is saying is that women should be both "the nourishing envelope" (nurturers), and the body (the nurtured body) - they should be both mothers (nurturers) and daughters (able to receive nurture) and "both of them" because *both* mothers and daughters should be able to *both* give and receive. Rather than competing with each other for the "unique place of the mother", rather than competing for the one, they should be two separate subjectivities, they should "play double". The paralysis created by them occupying the *one* place (of the object of man's desire) is displaced by the dynamics of relationality between the *two* (subjectivities).

For Irigaray freedom is double - both mother and daughter must be free in order for there to be a relation between the two: "En somme, nous libérer avec nos mères."⁶⁶ This need to achieve freedom *with the other* finds its echo in the relation between another mother-daughter couple, Isma and Mériem:

J'avais voulu m'exclure pour rompre avec le passé. Ce fardeau, pendant mes errances dans les villes où j'étais de passage, s'était allégé. Mériem m'avait écrit. J'accourais; *je ne pouvais me libérer seule*. (p. 90) [My emphasis]

⁶⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 103.

⁶⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère* (Montréal: Editions de la pleine lune, 1981), p. 86.

This last phrase also foreshadows the future relation between Isma and Hajila - because Isma will come to realise that she must not only liberate herself *with her daughter*, Mériem, but also *with her "sister"*, Hajila. Their relationship will then no longer conform to the substitutionary masculine economy based on the one's sacrifice of the other, but to a feminine economy based on the association or contiguity of the two.

Sexuality, repression and rivalry in an Islamic context

Islamic theories of sexuality

In the rest of Part 2 we pass from the extremes of the sultan's sacrifice and the bonds of sisterhood to the norms of Islamic society, where repression no longer takes the form of a threatened death sentence, but of innumerable social prohibitions, and where the bonds of sisterhood are displaced by stories which parade bitter rivalries between women. With reference to the work of Fatima Mernissi, I will examine the origins and mechanics of sexual repression in Islamic culture. Then, using the example of "L'exclue" (Chapter 5 of Part 2), I will show how this repression produces the conditions not only for negative relations *between the sexes* but also for the kind of rivalry *between women* which Irigaray denounces as *polemos*.

Mernissi refers to two ways of differentiating between Western and Islamic conceptions of sexuality. Some theories focus on the different ways in which Western and Islamic societies enforce sexual taboos; Western societies operate by "une forte intériorisation des interdits sexuels au cours du processus de socialisation", whereas Islamic societies operate by "des barrières de précautions extérieures telles que les règles de conduite ségrégationnistes." (such as veiling, seclusion, surveillance etc.).⁶⁷ Mernissi, however, believes that the contrast between Eastern and Western concepts of sexuality lies not so much between internalised ethics and external devices but between different conceptions of sexuality itself:

Dans les sociétés où l'isolement et la surveillance des femmes prédominent, le concept de la sexualité de la femme est implicitement actif, mais là où ces

⁶⁷ Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, idéologie, Islam*, p.9.

méthodes de surveillance et de coercition du comportement de la femme n'existent pas, le concept de la sexualité de la femme est passif.⁶⁸

Mernissi then qualifies the above statement, stating that Islamic society is in fact characterised by a "double theory" of sexual dynamics. On the one hand there is an *explicit assumption* of passive compliant female sexuality versus an active, aggressive masculine sexuality; on the other hand there is the *implicit assumption that female sexuality is active*.⁶⁹

Mernissi focuses her attention on this implicit assumption and quotes from the writings of Islamic clerics, such as Imam Ghazali, to illustrate her point. Imam Ghazali presents us not only with a sexually active woman but also with sexually insatiable woman: "Si l'on n'a pas fixé avec précision ce que la femme peut exiger en matière de coït, c'est en raison de la difficulté de la présentation d'une pareille requête et de la satisfaction à lui accorder."⁷⁰

For Mernissi these Islamic "images of women" stand in stark contrast to the images offered by Freud: "Par opposition à la passivité et la frigidité de la femme selon Freud, les exigences sexuelles de la femme selon Imam Ghazali semblent véritablement accablantes et la nécessité où est l'homme de les satisfaire devient un devoir social pressant."⁷¹ Mernissi describes the Islamic conception of female sexuality as female aggression turned outwards (in contrast to Freud's masochistic female whose sexuality is turned inwards): "La nature de son agressivité est précisément sexuelle. La femme musulmane est dotée d'une attraction fatale qui érode la volonté de l'homme de lui résister et le réduit à un rôle passif et soumis."⁷²

This Islamic theory of an active feminine sexuality creates a climate of suspicion around women who are branded as potential temptresses. The Muslim male, and by extension the Islamic social order, is threatened by this powerful female sexuality,

⁶⁸ Ibid. , p. 10.

⁶⁹ Ibid. , p.11. One could argue that Western society has also traditionally operated a double theory of feminine sexuality, a point which is reinforced by images of woman in Western literature: "But behind the angel lurks the monster: the obverse of the male idealisation of woman is the male fear of femininity". Quotation from Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics*, p. 58.

⁷⁰ al-Ghazali, *Revivification*, p. 50. Quoted in Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, idéologie, Islam*, p. 22.

⁷¹ Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, idéologie, Islam*, p. 22.

and by the “fitna” or “chaos” that the temptress woman has the potential to provoke “en attirant d’autres hommes vers des relations sexuelles illicites.”⁷³ This threat of “fitna” or sexual chaos in society is countered by a proliferation of external prohibitions imposed on women (such as veiling, surveillance, segregation, seclusion etc.), which exist to ensure that no forms of illicit sexual relationship (“zina”) outside marriage take place.

So whether a society adopts an active *or* a passive theory of sexuality, the result in either case is that women find themselves in the position of being repressed. Echoing Irigaray’s association of the female imaginary and the processes of the unconscious, Mernissi suggests that the dominant conceptualisation of the “Islamic” woman also offers the features of the unconscious, but not in the sense of its fluidity or mobility, but in the sense of its indifference to the laws of social order :

Il n’a pas le choix; il ne peut que céder à son attraction, d’où cette identification de la femme avec *fitna*, le chaos, avec les forces anti-sociales et anti-divines de l’univers.⁷⁴

Here again the woman becomes the negative in the representation of sexual difference, not as in Freud’s thinking because she is absence to his presence, but because she represents chaos to his (social) order. Here too we have echoes of Irigaray’s critique of Plato’s myth, as the feminine becomes synonymous not with the non-transcendental but with the “anti-divine”: “La femme ressemble dans ce sens à Satan dans son incitation à faire le mal et à le rendre séduisant.”⁷⁵

Because man’s first loyalty is to the divine, emotional attachment to women, (who are regarded as temptation away from the spiritual life), is discouraged, to the extent that Mernissi can speak of Muslim wariness of heterosexual involvement. By this she means that Islamic society is constructed in such a way as to undermine the possibility of a close male-female bond. Viewed from this vantage-point, many of the repressive features of Islamic society can be seen to conspire against male/female

⁷² Ibid. , pp. 24-25.

⁷³ Ibid. , p. 22.

⁷⁴ Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, idéologie, Islam*, p. 25.

intimacy - "la ségrégation sexuelle et ses corollaires: le mariage arrangé, le rôle important que joue la mère dans la vie du fils et la fragilité du lien matrimonial (révélée par les institutions que sont la répudiation et la polygamie)."⁷⁶ Moreover, as Djébar's text confirms, the repressive features of Islamic society also conspire against intimacy between *women*.

Polemos in an Islamic context...

The story of "l'exclue" illustrates how the image of the Islamic woman as *sexually aggressive or as temptress* leads to a climate of suspicion between women which recreates the conditions for Irigaray's *polemos*.

Irigaray believes that competition is the basic way that women relate to each other within patriarchal society. The supposed traditional expressions of empathy between women, based on comparatives, are dismissed by Irigaray as evidence of a more insidious form of *competition* which is rooted in their lack of subjectivity: "*Ces comme toi, moi aussi, moi plus (ou moins), comme tout le monde n'ont pas grand-chose à voir avec une éthique amoureuse. Ils sont les traces-symptômes du polemos entre femmes. Pas de avec toi dans cette économie.*"⁷⁷ This compulsive need to compare themselves to others deprives women of their own sense of self: "*Ces harcelants calculs (inconscients, ou préconscients) paralysent la fluidité des affects. Par durcissement, emprunt, situation des bords de l'autre pour "exister". Preuves d'amour, ces comparatifs abolissent la possibilité d'un lieu entre femmes. Elles s'estiment en fonction de mesures qui ne sont pas les leurs et qui occupent sans habiter ce lieu possible de leur identité.*"⁷⁸

Djébar's story of "l'exclue" and "la voyeuse" provides an extreme example of the kind of rivalry which Irigaray describes, which literally results in the *exclusion of a woman* not from the symbolic order, but from her social environment, from the village where she has grown up. Here is a graphic embodiment of what Irigaray

⁷⁵ Abu al-Hassan Muslim, al-Jami as-Sahib (Beyrouth: al Maktaba at-Tijariya) Vol.III, Book of Marriage, p. 130. Quoted in Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, idéologie, Islam*, p. 25.

⁷⁶ Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, idéologie, Islam*, p. 30.

⁷⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 102.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 101-02.

describes as “living in the edge of the other”, a story in which a woman, “la voyeuse”, literally positions herself “on the edges of the other”, by the window /edge so that she can spy on others: “... elle trônait devant ses persiennes entrouvertes. Écran derrière lequel elle guettait chaque instant de chaque jour...” (p. 119).

“La voyeuse”, Lla Hajda, becomes obsessed with the furtive glances exchanged between a young woman “mariée depuis l’âge de seize ans à un époux vieilli et malade” and a childhood friend of hers who has recently returned to the village (p. 123). She maliciously wills the inevitable to happen, “l’inattendu... ou le trop attendu!”, and it is as if her evil intent hastens the day when the young girl braves “l’interdit” and exchanges a few whispered words with her old friend (pp. 124, 125).

Lla Hajda’s response to this simple gesture is to spread salacious rumours about the young woman. Because of the assumption of the woman’s sexual aggression, the young man’s part in the incident is forgotten, while the finger of suspicion is pointed at the young woman: “Lla Hajda affirme que c’est la femme, la ‘possédée du démon’, ‘la tentatrice’, qui chuchote la première” (p. 124). As the widow’s diatribe against the “temptress and her sins” becomes more venomous, the nameless young woman is likened to the ultimate symbols of evil and temptation, and in the words of Mernissi, “d’où cette identification de la femme avec *fitna*, le chaos, avec les forces anti-sociales et anti-divines de l’univers”,⁷⁹ a comparison echoed in Djébar’s narrative: “Imaginez Satan. Ève” (p. 125). Finally, false accusations are added to speculation to bolster the case against the hapless defendant: “Je l’affirme: elle a réussi à glisser une lettre à son amoureux! L’ensorceleuse, la stérile!” (p. 125). The consequence of these accusations for the young woman are tragic - she is ostracised by the community and is compelled by her own family to leave her village for ever.

Irigaray’s explanation as to how women have the capacity to destroy one another is based on her belief that women experience difficulties in differentiation. Because women situate themselves on the edges of the other, the edges of the self are blurred, and they cannot completely differentiate themselves from one another. Women thus represent a kind of undifferentiated magma, “Sorte de magma, de ‘nuit où tous les

⁷⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, idéologie, Islam*, p. 25.

vaches sont noires'..."⁸⁰ and any woman who stands out from the crowd, who affirms her *own* identity, whose differentiated form rises up from the rest is regarded as a threat and destroyed:

Sans le savoir ni le vouloir, le plus souvent, les femmes constituent le moyen le plus terrible de leur propre oppression: elles détruisent tout ce qui émerge de leur condition indifférenciée, se faisant l'agent de leur propre anéantissement, de leur réduction à un même qui n'est pas *leur* même.⁸¹

So it is that in Djébar's story, one woman destroys another woman, precisely because she has stepped out of line, because she has dared to take the smallest step out of the shadow of "l'interdit".

Rescuing negative images of women

The story of "l'exclue" and other stories in Part 2 reveal Djébar's view of relations between women (like that of Irigaray) to be extremely negative. Irigaray's writing can be interpreted as propagating caricatural stereotypes of women and of parading images illustrating "[the] hatred of the mother, rivalry between women, women as women's own worst enemies." All the negative stereotypes mentioned above in relation to Irigaray resurface in Part 2 of Djébar's text (for the "hatred of the mother" see the story of Houria, pp. 141-44).

In *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, Whitford explains how Irigaray rescues these negative images of women: "What she does do is to make a link between certain clichés of psychological or psychoanalytical descriptions ... and the symbolic order; thus she allows for the possibility that a different symbolization could have [positive] effects on women's relationships with each other."⁸² I would like to show that a similar rescue-operation takes place in Djébar's text. What *Djébar* does is to make a link between her negative images of women and a positive transformation in Isma's consciousness (which takes place at the end of Part 2) which will enable her to enter into positive relations with women, and with Hajila in particular.

⁸⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 102.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 102.

In Part 1 of *Ombre sultane*, Isma opens herself up to the other (Hajila). In Part 2 she opens herself up to the “other others” of her past (the women of her childhood), and at the end of Part 2 she comes to realise that she too is part of that “otherness”, of that repressed maternal world, as her first buried memory of paternal repression (and separation from childhood) is brought to the fore of her consciousness.

The transformation of Isma’s consciousness takes the form of her retracing the moment of her separation from childhood, and her entry into the Law of The Father, a moment in which she is compelled to disown her own body and to place it under the Prohibition of the Father, the law of “l’interdit”. This reliving of the moment of separation from the body and entry into the paternal culture represents a turning-point in Isma’s life, which paves the way back towards her re-entry into the world of women.

The process of reliving the moment of separation (as a means of recovering a lost feminine identity) finds its echoes in Irigaray’s article “Le mystère oublié des généalogies féminines”⁸³, where she too advocates a way for women to work their way back to the maternal by *retracing the moment of separation* (from the maternal, and entry into the paternal). I will first look at Irigaray’s description of the process and then show how a similar process occurs in Djébar’s text.

In “Le mystère oublié des généalogies féminines”⁸⁴ this process of tracing back the relation with the maternal is described with reference to a mythical mother-daughter relationship:

Le plus bel exemple du devenir de la relation mère-fille est peut-être illustré par les mythes et rites relatifs à Déméter et Korè Mère et fille se retrouvent avec bonheur. Déméter demande à Perséphone de lui raconter tout ce qui lui est arrivé. Elle lui en fait le récit en commençant par la fin. *Elle remonte le temps en quelque sorte, comme doit le faire aujourd’hui toute femme qui tente de retrouver les traces de l’éloignement de sa mère. C’est à*

⁸² Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 78.

⁸³ Luce Irigaray, *Le temps de la différence*, pp. 101-23.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-23.

cela que devrait lui servir le parcours psychanalytique, à *retrouver le fil de son entrée, et, si possible, de sa sortie des enfers*.⁸⁵

Turning her attention from the mythical to the psychoanalytical, Irigaray refers to Freud's theoretical account of the turning away from the mother. Continuing the metaphor of the entry into patriarchy as Hades ("l'entrée et la sortie des enfers"), Freud now becomes the villain of the piece, the devil incarnate, pointing the way away from the mother figure into the hell-fires of patriarchy:

Freud se conduit ici en prince des ténèbres par rapport à toutes les femmes. Il les entraîne dans l'ombre et la séparation d'avec leur mère et d'avec elles-mêmes pour l'établissement d'une culture de l'entre-hommes: Elle doit oublier son enfance, sa mère, elle doit s'oublier dans sa relation à la *philotès* d'Aphrodite.⁸⁶

Turning to Djebbar's narrative, the motifs of separation, loss of childhood/feminine identity, and the imposition of paternal culture resurface. In contrast to Irigaray's metaphor of the spiritual underworld, conjuring up images of eternal separation and torment, Djebbar comes up with a more physical image of separation, that of "la mutilation originelle", conjuring up the trauma and lasting disfigurement of a violent amputation (p. 145).

In Chapter 9 Isma describes how the repressed memory of this separation/mutilation now flows back into her adult consciousness. The experience of mutilation is identified with a specific moment in time and space, an impromptu escapade to a fair which ends in recrimination. In her description of the incident, Djebbar foregrounds the child's relation to her body, contrasting Isma's carefree enjoyment of physical sensations with the ambiguity later installed by paternal intervention.

While playing with a cousin one day, the young Isma comes across a circus where she rides on a giant mechanical swing. The action of swinging serves to magnify the pleasures of occupying not only her body space, but the airspace around her :

⁸⁵ Ibid. , pp.112, 118. [My emphasis]

⁸⁶ Ibid. , p. 121.

Quand la mécanique, jusque-là à terre, fut soulevée dans le ciel, quand, assise tremblante mais émerveillée, les bras accrochés aux barres, je sentis mon corps s'élever et se rythmer en tanguant régulièrement, plus rien n'exista, ni la ville, ni la foule, ni le cousin, seuls l'espace mobile et mon propre balancement. (p. 146)

The pleasure of her experience is intensified as she lets herself go further into the air: "Pour mieux sentir la rafale du vent sur mes joues et aviver l'excitation qui me rendait légère, comme éparpillée dans le soir commençant, je m'étais dressée. Ma jupe plissée virevoltant, je m'amusais à plier les genoux, quand la balançoire commença à ralentir" (p. 147).

This carefree scene abruptly comes to an end when Isma's father unexpectedly turns up, discovers her in mid-flight and swiftly orders her to return home with him. The reason for this sudden withdrawal only dawns slowly on Isma. When he starts voicing his thoughts - his horror caused by "... le fait que 'sa fille, sa propre fille, habillée d'une jupe courte, puisse, au-dessus des regards des hommes, montrer ses jambes'!" (pp. 147-48), Isma, unable to comprehend his response, takes refuge in complete denial:

Percevant enfin ses mots débités à voix basse, j'écoutais un inconnu, non, pas mon père; "pas mon père", me répétais-je. (p. 147)

What Isma has to come to terms with is that her body is no longer her own but has become the object of paternal censure. This incident not only represents a turning-point in Isma's attitude towards her father, and in her self-perception as an emancipated young girl, but more significantly, points to a traumatic experience of separation. This separation is described as expatriation, as banishment: "*Ce jour-là, je m'exilai de l'enfance*", as propulsion into foreign territory, "les mots paternels m'avaient projetée ailleurs", into an abyss "au plus profond d'un gouffre étrange", an underworld which recalls Irigaray's Hades (p. 148). The foreign territory she has now consciously entered into is patriarchy, the country which, according to Irigaray, requires its women to leave their mothers, to disown their bodies, *and to forget their*

childhoods in the name of its masculine culture: “Elle doit oublier son enfance, sa mère, elle doit s’oublier dans sa relation à la *philotès* d’Aphrodite.”⁸⁷

In a variation on Irigaray’s “buried act of matricide”, here we have “un père qui se présente en organisateur de précoces funéraires.” This incident marks the “death” of Isma’s childhood and her entry into masculine culture. But, as Irigaray suggests, the reliving of this kind of experience is the key to being liberated from its effects:

C’est à cela que devrait lui servir le parcours psychanalytique, à retrouver le fil de son entrée, et, si possible, de sa sortie des enfers.⁸⁸

Isma has recovered “les fils de son entrée dans les enfers” and now she will burrow her way out of the underworld, she will find the way out, not only for herself but also for Hajila: “L’enfance, ô Hajila! Te déterrer hors de ce terreau commun qui embourbe!” (p. 149). But even as the promise of liberation is whispered, the difficulty of the task, already foreshadowed in Irigaray’s “si possible”, is echoed in the final words of Part 2: “Éveilleuse pour quel désenchantement...” (p. 149).

The process of awakening and the transition to disillusionment is enacted in Part 3, where Isma finally comes face to face with Hajila.

Part 3 - Maternal restoration or paternal revenge?

Introduction

In Irigaray’s work the terms “same” and the “economy of the same” are normally used to refer to the self-reflexive masculine economy. However, in “L’amour du même, l’amour de l’Autre”⁸⁹, Irigaray refers to “sameness” *not in relation to the economy of the same*, but in relation to the *maternal-feminine*. Here “sameness” is no longer associated with the reproduction of the same (as in the self-reflexive masculine economy of the same) but rather with a pre-subjective undifferentiated

⁸⁷ Ibid. , p. 121.

⁸⁸ Ibid. , p. 118.

⁸⁹ Luce Irigaray, “L’amour du même, l’amour de l’Autre”, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, pp. 97-111.

sameness (as in the undifferentiated maternal-feminine) from which the subject emerges as body.

These seemingly opposite connotations of sameness (first in relation to the masculine and then in relation to the feminine) are explained by Irigaray's belief that the original feminine sameness has come to be appropriated by the masculine. Man forgets his original undifferentiated state, his original feminine sameness, which he substitutes for a masculine sameness which he manufactures himself: "Là où était la germination, la naissance, la croissance selon l'économie naturelle, l'homme met l'instrument et l'oeuvre."⁹⁰

So male production becomes a substitute for female reproduction. Production becomes his own "sameness", the origin to which he now relates, from which he creates his identity, while his real origin is forgotten: "Elle, au moins deux fois oubliée, demeure fond nocturne, sommeil légal à partir desquels il s'érige, et ransparence imperceptible de l'entrée en présence."⁹¹

It is in this context that we read Irigaray's insistence on "the love of sameness" in :

Aucun amour du même que moi, posé et maintenu hors de moi dans sa différence, ne peut avoir lieu sans
- interprétation de l'amour du même: maternel-féminin encore indifférencié, sous-sol de toute possibilité de détermination d'identité.⁹²

Isma's identification with Hajila's suffering in Part 1 and her identification with the exclusion of women in Part 2 (which I have referred to up till now in terms of otherness) can now be interpreted as a return to the original sameness, a return to the feminine, an identification with the world of women. However, although Irigaray insists on the recognition of the feminine, on the love of sameness, she also argues that for a positive relation to emerge between two subjectivities, this love of

⁹⁰ Ibid. , p. 99.

⁹¹ *L'oubli de l'air, chez Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Minuit, 1983). Quoted in Luce Irigaray, "L'amour du même, l'amour de l'Autre", *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 98.

⁹² Ibid. , p. 98.

sameness must be accompanied by a recognition of difference: "... [un] amour du même que moi, posé et maintenu hors de moi dans sa différence..."⁹³

In Part 3 I will demonstrate how Hajila and Isma's relationship moves from the recognition of sameness to a recognition of difference. Before that I will refer to three chapters in *J'aime à toi*, "Toi qui ne seras jamais mien", "J'aime à toi", and "Dans un silence presque absolu" in which Irigaray communicates her vision of the coming into being of a *positive relation* between subjectivities as a result of the *recognition of difference*.

Love in the positive, Love in the negative

In "Toi qui ne seras jamais mien", Irigaray claims that the only way for two subjects to relate to each other positively is for each of them to recognise each other's difference.

In the opening passage of the article she opposes the two concepts of difference and sameness. Sameness in this context is associated with indifferentiation, with completeness and unity, in other words with the complete identification of one subjectivity with the other, resulting in one of the subjectivities being encircled or engulfed by the other. Difference on the other hand is the existence or creation of a gap between two subjectivities, each of which is separated and therefore guaranteed by this difference.

Difference as a "gap" between two subjectivities prevents them merging together, and being subsumed into one. This gap operates as a no-go area or protective zone around each subjectivity, so that the one becomes irreducible to the other: "Nous sommes insubstitutables l'un à l'autre. Tu m'es transcendant(e), inaccessible en un sens..."⁹⁴

Irigaray makes a distinction between knowing and identifying the other and knowing or identifying with the other *completely*. This complete knowing or identification with the other prevents the distance required for differentiation to be achieved, and,

⁹³ Ibid. , p. 98.

⁹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *J'aime à toi*, p. 161.

as such, should be resisted. Irigaray reformulates this idea in several ways: “Je ne peux *complètement* t’identifier, a fortiori m’identifier à toi Tu ne me seras jamais *totalement* visible”⁹⁵

In “You who will never be mine” difference is articulated as a negative. The negative (gap) is what enables the positive interaction between subjectivities to take place: “La puissance d’un négatif demeure entre nous.”⁹⁶ The power of this relational negative is reinforced linguistically by a whole string of negative verbal phrases, each of which stresses the essential elusiveness or impenetrability of the other:

“une liberté qui ne sera jamais mienne, une subjectivité qui ne sera jamais mienne, un mien qui ne sera jamais mien.”⁹⁷

In “J’aime à toi” Irigaray describes the same process of recognition, but this time using positive language structures. The gap expressed in the negative resurfaces linguistically as the preposition “to” which represents difference as mediation between two subjectivities: “I love to you”. Without the “to” (i.e.. In the phrase “I love you”) Irigaray argues, the other person (“you”) is reduced grammatically and relationally to an object: “Le ‘à’ empêche le rapport de transitivité sans irréductibilité de l’autre, et réciprocité possible. ... Le ‘à’ est le lieu de non-réduction de la personne à objet.”⁹⁸

For Irigaray, the “to” is a guarantor not only of the other’s alterity but also of the other’s intentionality: “Le ‘à’ est garant de deux intentionnalités: la mienne et la tienne.”⁹⁹ The coming into being of two intentionalities is dependant on the subject’s willingness to listen to the other: “Si je suis attentif(ve) à ton intentionnalité, à ta fidélité à toi-même et à son/ton devenir, il m’est permis

⁹⁵ Ibid. pp. 161, 163. [My emphasis]

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 161

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 162.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 171, 172.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 173.

d'imaginer si une durée peut exister entre nous, si nos intentionnalités peuvent s'accorder"¹⁰⁰

Irigaray relates the act of listening with its corollary, the ability to keep silent. The attentive listener does not presume to "put words into the other's mouth" but allows for "...[le] non-encore codé, [le] silence, un lieu d'existence, d'initiative, d'intentionnalité libre, de soutien à ton devenir".¹⁰¹ Silence challenges the preordained symbolic code of language, culture and relations, creating a sonic gap, a blank page upon which nothing is imposed or superimposed, a space which allows the other to be and to become: "Ce silence n'est pas hostile ni restrictif. Il est disponibilité que rien ni personne n'occupe, ne préoccupe."¹⁰²

Listening with mother

T'écouter demande donc que je me rende disponible, que je sois encore et toujours capable de silence. Ce geste, jusqu'à un certain point, me libère moi-même.¹⁰³

Irigaray's insistence on "availability" brings us back to Djébar's text and to the end of Part 2 where Isma wonders how to make herself available to Hajila ("...je cherche comment me présenter à toi..." p. 149). In the end, she decides to go to the family home and meet Hajila face to face. This initial encounter is followed by two subsequent meetings between Hajila and Isma, in the local hammam. These meetings are marked by *silence*, a silence which permits difference to come into being, and which enables Hajila to walk out of the shadowlands of Isma's unconscious and to finally emerge as a separate subjectivity.

The first time Isma meets Hajila, she turns up unannounced at her ex-husband's flat (and has to brave the hostility of Touma, Hajila's mother), only to find Hajila, weakened by her pregnancy, lying down on a bed:

Je suis apparue sur le seuil. Devant toi, enfin. Pour la première fois. Toi, *ma fille et ma mère, ma consanguine*: ma blessure renouvelée (ainsi les mots ne

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 175.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 181.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 183-84.

mentent jamais). Te soutenant contre les murs, dans ta robe claire, bleu pâle, tu tentes de te tenir debout. J'aurais pu pleurer à la vue de ta défaillance. (p. 157) [My emphasis]

Isma's reference to "mothers and daughters" is a pointer to the kind of reciprocal duality of relation which both Irigaray and Djebbar believe in, echoing Irigaray's call to women to be double, to love one another both as mothers and as daughters¹⁰⁴, and foreshadowing the double gesture which will be enacted in the next meeting between Isma and Hajila. Moreover, the term "consanguine" recalls the contiguity which, for Irigaray, represents the ideal marker of the mother-daughter relation.

At the end of this first encounter, Isma hurriedly whispers to Hajila an arrangement for them to meet the following Friday. Significantly, the second meeting takes place in the hammam. Djebbar foregrounds the symbolism of the hammam as womb, first implicitly "Retrouver chaleur, réconfort dans le bourdonnement d'échos sous des voûtes hautes." and then explicitly "Je ne m'oublie que dans les brumes de vapeur brûlante, je ne m'abîme que dans l'eau mère: hier, celle de la volupté, aujourd'hui ruisseaux d'enfance remémorée" (p. 158). The hammam will be the space in which both women can "become", it will function like a narrative version of Irigaray's 'other of the other', a cave-womb-like space which woman can call her own, where "women [can be] among themselves, and where they can discover "love of the self on the side of women"¹⁰⁵.

In the second image offered by Djebbar, the hammam-womb merges into an inverted harem, where, as in Irigaray's maternal genealogy, feminine ritual (if not fertility) allows for transformation and renewal : "Chaque nuit, le bain maure, qui sert de dortoir aux ruraux de passage, devient un harem inversé, perméable - comme si, dans la dissolution des sueurs, des odeurs, des peaux mortes, cette prison liquide devenait lieu de renaissance nocturne. De transfusion. Là s'effectuent les passages de symbole, là jaillissent les éclairs de connivence, et leurs frôlements tremblés" (pp. 158-59).

¹⁰⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 103.

¹⁰⁵ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 104.

As Isma and Hajila catch sight of each other, Djebbar, like Irigaray, makes the link between the recognition of the other and the sounds of silence: “Lors de ce deuxième vendredi, tu es entrée. Tu m’as reconnue Nous n’avons pas parlé...” (p. 161). This silence continues as Isma performs the ritual cleansing on Hajila: “En silence, j’ai empli d’eau chaude une tasse de cuivre; j’en déversai le jet sur tes épaules, puis sur ta chevelure” (p161). Rather than invading and overwhelming Hajila’s world with her words (as she did incessantly in Part 1), Isma is now creating with her silence, a gap, a space between herself and Hajila that allows her, in Irigaray’s words, “to become.”

The silence is only broken when Hajila makes a gesture of appreciation towards Isma: “Continue! Que tu sois bénie! Cela me fait tant de bien...” (p. 161). And with a few perfunctory words they set the scene for their final encounter: “A vendredi prochain” (p. 161).

The final planned meeting between the two women can be interpreted in the light of Irigaray’s words on “wonder”. Irigaray’s discourse on wonder is yet another variation of the theme of difference. Difference can emerge not only as a result of silence but also as a result of wonder which also creates space between subjectivities. Wonder is associated with surprise. It is that in the other which we did not presume to be there - the uncoded, unexpected, mysterious, elusive:

Cet(te) autre devrait encore et encore nous *surprendre*, nous apparaître comme *nouveau*, *fort différent* de ce que nous connaissions ou que nous supposions qu’il devait être. Ce qui fait que nous le regarderions, nous arrêterions pour le regarder, nous interroger, nous approcher dans le questionnement. *Qui es-tu? Je suis et je deviens* grâce à cette question...¹⁰⁶

Isma arrives early for their next meeting in the hammam, and in a build-up to Hajila’s entrance, the rituals of cleansing are performed with a deliberate slowness in the space symbolised as womb : “Dissoudre la touffeur de la claustration grâce à ce succédané du cocon maternel...” (p. 163). When Hajila finally arrives, both women stand side by side: “Nous nous sommes lavées l’une à côté de l’autre” (p. 163). This image, of two subjectivities which are separate yet side by side, recalls the contiguity

of Irigaray's maternal genealogy. The next image is of Hajila performing the ritual cleansings on Isma, followed by Isma doing the same for her, a double gesture, with which Djébar establishes a reciprocal duality between the two women: "... tu as proposé de me savonner les épaules et le dos, tu m'as aspergée de la dernière eau, la plus froide, celle du rinçage. A mon tour, j'ai fait pareil" (p. 163).

This moment of peaceful intimacy is broken by Isma's voice offering Hajila the key to her escape from the life she abhors and the child she did not wish to have: "Touma t'empêche de sortir ... Que tu gardes cet enfant dans ton ventre ou que tu le rejettes, c'est à toi d'en décider! Sors, consulte un médecin, une amie, qui tu veux. Sors, seulement pour sortir!" (p. 163). The offer of this gift to Hajila is followed by a moment of "wonder", where Isma looks at Hajila with new eyes:

Tu me dévisageais, yeux grands ouverts, les bras ruisselants de vapeur. Dans cette pose de baigneuse un peu gauche, ton visage habité d'une hésitation enfantine, je perçois enfin ta grâce de femme; *ton secret*. (Et je me rappelle que, dans mon dialecte arabe, au-dessus de la beauté qu'on peut célébrer chez une femme, c'est "*le secret*" qu'on loue, la trace insaisissable qu'il laisse transparaître sur une face). (pp. 163-64) [My emphasis]

As Isma pauses in wonder before Hajila, as she recognises her "secret", her essential elusiveness, "la trace insaisissable", it is as if a protective ring has been formed around Hajila, a no-go area which Isma can no longer penetrate. It is at this moment that Isma finally lets go of Hajila, who is no longer "ombre" but "forme", no longer a projection of Isma's unconsciousness, but a subjectivity, a separate and impenetrable consciousness all of her own. From now on Isma's words will no longer overwrite Hajila's, they will never capture her every movement. As we will see, Isma will no longer be able to enter Hajila's mind, she will no longer be able to read her every thought: "Je te reconnais suppose que je ne peux pas te voir de part en part. Tu ne me seras jamais totalement visible mais, grâce à cela, je te respecte comme différent(e) de moi."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 77.

¹⁰⁷ Luce Irigaray, *J'aime à toi*, p. 163.

Future imperfect

Je te donne du silence où le futur de toi – et peut-être de moi mais avec toi et
st non *comme* toi et *sans* toi – peut émerger et se fonder.¹⁰⁸

What kind of future does Djebbar envisage for Hajila and Isma? In the last two chapters we are presented with what may appear a confusing succession of unexpected narrative twists. These narrative twists can be interpreted in the light of the “symbolic” (in the conventional sense of the word) transformation of Hajila and Isma, who lose their own “specificity” and become symbolic representations of the two faces of Algerian womanhood, modern and traditional, both of whom have tasted liberation only to have it snatched away: “Éveilleuse pour quel désenchantement...” (p. 149).

The first “confusing” twist is Isma’s seemingly unexplained and inexplicable decision to return to the traditional village and lifestyle of her youth, “la cité rousse là-bas d’où ma mère ne sortit jamais ... “Je désire m’enfoncer, à mon tour. A ma manière, me revoiler... Reculer dans l’ombre; m’ensevelir”(pp. 165-66). The decision and the reasons proffered for making it do not seem to be in keeping with the “intentionality” of an emancipated woman: “N’aimer nulle part, sinon en mon lieu d’origine, mon royaume. Je ne sais quel homme je choisirai de nouveau, je veux prévoir au moins les lieux où je pourrai aimer” (p. 165). Moreover it appears that this retreat into traditionalism is not a necessary compromise but a deliberate choice: “Je *désire* m’enfoncer, à mon tour” (p. 166) [My emphasis].

Hajila on the other hand, more predictably, moves out into the outside world: “Or toi ... tu as vécu enfermée depuis l’enfance. A partir de ce lieu, tu cherches ta percée; tu quêtes ton échappée. Ville-vaisseau de ta première mobilité; de là, ta marche va commencer” (p. 166). But Hajila’s journey, as we will discover, will not be a slow walk to freedom but yet another journey into darkness.

As the two women walk in different directions, it is as if Isma herself catches a glimpse of the gap between them, the gap which now prevents her from seeing “right

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. , p. 117.

through” Hajila: “Ainsi je ne te crée plus, je ne t’imagine plus. Simplement je t’attends” (p. 166). Isma who once pre-empted Hajila’s intentionality and who captured her every movement can no longer read Hajila’s thoughts, no longer knows her completely, no longer knows exactly when she is coming or going: “Tout au plus, je ne pensais pas que tu sortirais si tôt” (p. 167) In order to know her movements she has to follow her, no longer in her mind, but in person: “Je t’ai suivie le dernier jour” (p. 167).

The “last day” (the last time Isma follows Hajila) is to be transposed into an apocalyptic vision of near-death. The darkness of the last hour is prefigured at the end of chapter II of Part 3, as the point when Hajila and Isma leave the warm safety of the hammam: “nous nous mettons à craindre le dehors” (p.164). In the final pages, the outside world, which had come to mean a place of escape and growth for Hajila, is now transformed into a threatening space, overwhelmed by men:

Tour à tour, sur la scène du monde qui nous est refusée, dans l’espace qui nous est interdit, dans les flots de la lumière qui nous est retirée, tour à tour, toi et moi, fantômes et reflets pour chacune, nous devenons la sultane et sa suivante, la suivante et sa sultane! Les hommes n’existent plus, ou plutôt si, ils piétinent, ils encombrent. Ils espionnent, les yeux définitivement crevés! (p. 168)

The “last day” witnesses Hajila’s brush with death as the drama of the car accident unfolds, leading to the death of Hajila’s unborn child. As Isma rushes to the scene, there appears to be a sudden flashback to the kind of undifferentiated identification the narrative has been working against, undifferentiated not in the sense that Isma can see *through* Hajila again, but undifferentiated in the sense that she now sees herself *as* Hajila:

Moi, j’ai regardé ton visage pâle. *J’ai vu le mien*, que je n’avais jamais pu voir, à ce même instant où l’aile de la mort vous caresse Mon visage que je n’ai pas trouvé” (pp. 168-69) [My emphasis]

As the dark clouds of patriarchy invade the text, it as if Hajila and Isma lose their individuality and become not separate beings, but joint victims, “fantômes et reflets pour chacune” (p. 168), depersonalised and objectified by the world of men. Having

struggled to present us with “deux femmes-sujets”, the narrative abruptly retreats, leaving us with “deux femmes-objets”, both at the mercy of the world of men.

Our hopes for both women are suddenly dashed. Isma, the emancipated woman, literally walks back into the darkness whereas Hajila, the newly freed woman, walks forward into the nightmare of prostitution, a transition which Djébar prefigures in the preface: “Là-bas, dans la capitale, tu dérivais, errante, mendiante, peut-être femme offerte aux passants ou aux voyageurs d’un jour. Nous voici toutes deux en rupture de harem, mais à ses pôles extrêmes: toi au soleil désormais exposée, moi tentée de m’enfoncer dans la nuit resurgie” (p. 10). We are left with two uncomfortable images, the slave-woman liberated only to turn to prostitution, the emancipated woman turning back to tradition. Just as Isma and Hajila appear to have tasted liberty, Djébar then sweeps that liberty from under their feet and transports them into unknown territory: “Sitôt libérées du passé, où sommes-nous?” (p. 171).

Horizons of Disillusionment

In the final chapter, “Luth”, the themes of uncertainty and darkness form a leitmotif which comes to encompass not only the story of Hajila and Isma but which also doubles back to take hold of the story of *Les Mille et Une Nuits* and then spirals into the future and out of the narrative context of the story to extend over recent Algerian history.

First to be caught up in the whirlwinds of uncertainty is the story *Les Mille et Une Nuits*. The possibility of escape from death and the patriarchal economy, first foregrounded in this story, rapidly recedes as the hope of liberation is placed within the wider context of the story which uncovers the fragility of the two sisters’ fates: “la reine des aubes, sur son estrade, n’espère survivre que jour après jour” (p. 171). As their freedom recedes, so does the bright horizon of sisterhood. Their loss of liberty is then made to echo two deeper losses: the separation from the maternal (that of “l’enfance disparue”), and the separation from the bodily (that of “les mutilées de l’adolescence”) (p. 171). As the losses reverberate and spiral into the emptiness, Isma’s dream of saving her sister is revealed as illusory, its transitoriness cruelly

resounding in Isma's doubts: "O ma soeur, j'ai peur, moi qui ai cru te réveiller" (p.171).

Liberated only to be bound by tradition or blighted by prostitution, Isma and Hajila, the two faces of Algerian woman, modern and traditional, have both been awakened only to be hemmed in by the blackest of nights, their fates mirroring the fate of all the other "femmes d'Algérie":

J'ai peur que toutes deux, que toutes trois, que toutes ... nous nous retrouvions entravées là, dans "cet occident de l'Orient", ce lieu de la terre où si lentement l'aurore a brillé pour nous que déjà, de toutes parts, le crépuscule vient nous cerner. (pp. 171-72).

Conclusion

Ombre sultane is a narrative that works towards Irigaray's ideal of female subjectivity and sociality, only to abandon that ideal, in the face of the nightmare of political and social realities of Djébar's native Algeria. So whereas in the beginning we are slowly led towards the bright horizon of sisterhood and the possibility of female subjectivity, this hope of liberation is revealed to be transitory at the end of the novel, which offers little resistance to the forces of darkness and little hope for female subjectivity. So for Djébar, what starts off being an accessible idea - the liberation of woman thanks to the bonds of sisterhood - is revealed to be an *impossible dream*.

If I can compare the general direction of the novel with the general direction of Irigaray's thinking, it seems to me that the transition which operates in Djébar's novel is reversed in Irigaray's work. In her earlier works, Irigaray *starts off* by presenting female subjectivity and sociality as a utopian if not *impossible dream*, as a "blueprint for the future" which will take place "come the symbolic revolution". In her later writing, however, female subjectivity and sexual difference come to represent a more accessible idea, a reality that can be cultivated within the limitations of our *present* symbolic.

So both Djébar and Irigaray depart from the same starting-point - an interest in reclaiming *female subjectivity*. For Djébar, what starts off as a potential reality -

female subjectivity - turns into an impossible ideal. For Irigaray, what starts off as an impossible ideal - female subjectivity - turns into a potential reality. So it is not only Hajila and Isma who go their separate ways but also Djébar and Irigaray. For, as we watch Djébar, surrounded by her ghost women, chained and bound, “entravées là, dans ‘cet Occident de l’Orient’ ”, disappearing, with them, into the night, we can hear Irigaray’s voice proclaiming “la réalité et la fécondité de la différence sexuelle”¹⁰⁹, as she advances towards a distant but bright horizon of hope.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. , p. 22.

In dialogue with Feminisms: *Loin de Médine*

Introduction

Loin de Médine is Assia Djébar's powerful reconstruction of pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabia, set around the time of the Prophet's death. In this novel Djébar goes back to the roots of Islam and attempts to reclaim the religion for women, going so far as to say that the Islamic age heralded "une révolution féministe". By this statement alone, the novel enters into immediate dialogue with the work of other Arab feminist historical scholars, in an exchange which throws up the following questions: Can Islam be reclaimed for women? And can Djébar invent a "politically-correct" Islam, palatable to both East and West? In examining Djébar's re-working of Islam, I will refer mainly to the historical research of the Arab feminist historian Leila Ahmed, but also to the work of Fatima Mernissi, as well as the revisionist approaches of Christian feminist theologians. Finally a look at the principles of mainstream feminist historical scholarship will help to put Djébar's own approach within a broader perspective.

The Blank Page

A good framework for understanding *Médine* is Isak Dinesen's short story, "The Blank Page", which illustrates some of the principles and contradictions inherent in the text. The story, which has been passed down by generations of women, tells of a convent whose nuns, renowned for producing the finest flax in Portugal, act as the privileged suppliers of linen bridal sheets to the princesses of the royal household: "sheets which, blood-spotted, are hung on the balcony of the palace the morning after the wedding, as the Chamberlain of High Steward proclaims, 'Virginem eam tenemus' ('We declare her to have been a virgin')".¹ The nuns' privilege extends to maintaining a gallery, displaying a series of gilt frames, "each of them adorned with a coroneted plate of pure gold, on which is engraved the name of a princess". Each of the frames displays a square cut from a royal wedding sheet bearing "the faded

¹ Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman", in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (eds), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 5.

markings” of the wedding night; each frame that is except for one “... on this one plate no name is inscribed, and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page.”²

Greene and Kahn point to the analogies Dinesen draws between bloodstained sheet and printed page, between female body and male authority, which “make[s] the story a critique of culture.”³ Furthermore, they creatively interpret “the contrast between the story told by the spotted bridal sheets and that which speaks in the silence of ‘the blank page’ ” as a metaphor for the two major prongs of feminist scholarship: “deconstructing dominant male patterns of thought and social practice; and reconstructing female experience previously hidden or overlooked.”⁴

In *Loin de Médine*, Djebbar consciously reconstructs female experience in an era that has become the property of male historians writing male history from a male perspective. Her stated sources are respected historians from the eighth and ninth centuries AD (Ibn Hicham, Ibn Saad, Tabari) who, as Djebbar puts it, are “Transmetteurs certes scrupuleux, mais naturellement portés, par habitude déjà, à occulter toute présence féminine...”⁵ Djebbar takes on the task of filling in the blank pages, of sounding out the “silences” in these historians’ accounts, which according to Watt, are prone to “tendential shaping”.⁶

W. Montgomery Watt suggests that “tendential shaping” or the distortion of accounts of historical events, is a major problem in ninth century Islamic sources. He proposes that accounts of external acts are not the most likely subject of distortion, but rather the qualities and motivations attributed to the major actors in them. As far as Djebbar is concerned, tendential shaping is at its most noticeable when it comes to the contributions of women, as the story of “la reine yéménite” illustrates. The Yemenite queen, like the anonymous princess of Dinesen’s story, has been denied a name in the annals of history (p. 17), and this omission is compounded by the

² Isak Dinesen, *Last Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1975), pp. 103, 104.

³ Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, “Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman”, p. 6.

⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵ Assia Djebbar, *Loin de Médine* (Paris: Albin Michel, Livre de Poche, 1991), Avant-propos.

⁶ W. Montgomery Watt, *Mohammed at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. xiii, xiv

obscuring of her pivotal role as a historical agent. Djébar resuscitates her queen and gives her form: "La reine yéménite possède sans doute un corps frêle, des bras fragiles, des mains non de guerrière, mais de poupée. Peut-être... Même si nous rêvons à d'autres formes physiques, pour la modeler là, devant nous, elle ne va pas elle-même résolument jusqu'au sang pour les autres" (p. 26).

As the story goes, Aswad, a "false prophet" of the Ans tribe, kills the queen's husband, seizes the queen and then proceeds to marry her. The account is framed by the prophetic words of Mohammed who foresees Aswad's imminent death. In Djébar's reconstruction of the story, the queen, "l'âme de la machination" (p. 20), initiates and perpetrates the killing of her new husband, dreaming up the murder scenario, drawing the unsuspecting king to her bed, and allowing Fires, the ex-king's cousin to accomplish the final deed. Tabari's account, however, points to two alternative reasons for the plot's success, each of which denies the queen's role as major actor. According to him, it is not the queen's "furie froide" (p. 20) which drives the murderous outcome but Aswad's drunken stupor on the night, combined with the malediction of the prophet: "La chronique préfère insister sur l'ivresse de l'homme, sur son péché d'avoir été maudit par le Prophète en personne. Comme si les voies qu'emprunte la comploteuse si assurée n'étaient que provisoires" (p. 21).

Djébar wishes to restore "la reine yéménite" and her sisters to their proper place in the history, and to free them from the grip of "tendential shaping" to which Islamic history has succumbed in the hands of the male historian. This "tendential shaping" is evidenced on two counts: it is inscribed by an entrenched *Islamic* ideology which is set to reshape the pre-Islamic age or *Jahilia* in an Islamic mould, holding it up as an age of ignorance (*Jahilia* means "Ignorance") before the Golden Age of Islam, and it is inscribed by an entrenched *patriarchal* ideology only too ready to draw a veil over "la femme".

Djébar takes a stand against a monochrome vision of the past, with the monolithic force of Islam as its starting-point. Her reconstructed pages may be overshadowed by the black and white emblem of Islam, but they are framed by a multi-coloured, polyvalent surround, reflecting the diversity of race and religion which characterised

the transitional period they cover, setting in motion the discovery of “une origine multiple, plurielle, et occultée par la réécriture phallique.”⁷

Her eyes are drawn to the powerful women of the *Jahilia* whose autonomy she upholds, not as a threat to the incoming era of Islam, but as a celebration of the untamed spirit of womanhood. She resurrects the forgotten, neglected heroines of the past, women who have tasted freedom and who fear no man, mighty warriors and prophetesses, women like Selma who have known “la liberté bédouine” (p. 33) or Sajdah, the prophetess who represents “la menace d’une liberté incontrôlée” (p. 43), or the fearless “chanteuse des satires” who comes to embody “une part de l’âme de résistance des siens” (p. 131). As in Dinesen’s story, in *Loin de Médine* there is also a gallery of fame, and it is Djébar’s project to reinstate her neglected heroines, both Muslim and non-Muslim, into successive frames, projecting technicolour images and quadrasonic sound onto each “blank page”.

The Form of the novel

Djébar’s desire to reconstruct woman’s experience can be discerned from the form of the novel, which she divides into three parts, containing three types of chapters (standard “narrative” chapters, chapters entitled “rawiya”, containing oral narratives of female story-tellers, and chapters entitled “voix”, expressing feminine voices). While the “rawiya” sections function like new pages inserted into the annals of history, the “voix” sections enable women to speak out from between the lines of the blank pages of the male historians’ writing, which in turn form the basis of an ironic commentary in the main “narrative” sections. And, just as Isak Dinesen’s snow-white squares fire the imagination (who was she?, what happened?), so the blanks in “the réécriture phallique” fire that of Djébar (What was she really like?, How would she have expressed herself?): “Dès lors la fiction, comblant les béances de la mémoire collective, s’est révélée nécessaire pour la mise en espace que j’ai tentée là, pour rétablir la durée de ces jours que j’ai désiré habiter...” (Avant-propos).

⁷ Clarisse Zimra, “Comment peut-on être musulmane?: Assia Djébar repense Médine”, *notre librairie*, 118, Nouvelles Écritures Feminines 2: Femmes d’ici et d’ailleurs (July- September 1994), pp. 57-63, p. 61.

In the first part of the work, the “rawiyates” and “voix” sections have the effect of interrupting the main narrative sections. “Rawiya”, singular of “rawiyates” is, as Djébar explains, the feminine form of “rawiy”, a term denoting a storyteller within a specific Islamic context; namely one who invokes an incident in the life of the Prophet or of one of his Companions (Avant-propos). The “rawiyates” create a female chain of oral transmission which consciously mimics the “Isnad” or chain of transmission that must be established to authenticate a *hadith*.⁸ As the words of both well-known and anonymous women in the “rawiyates” and “voix” proliferate, they open up “un univers d’oralité”.⁹ According to Greene and Kahn, again referring to Dinesen’s tale, the traditional function of an oral culture is to subvert the dominant ideology:

The complex, ambivalent relation of women to the patriarchy is suggested by Dinesen’s tale, which concerns two types of ‘communities of women’ – both those that serve the dominant culture and those that subvert it. Each of these communities is the custodian of a tradition: the nuns, of the ancient craft of weaving; the storytellers, of the equally ancient art of narrative which has been handed down from one generation of women to the next. But though the nuns with their traditional ‘frames’... serve the interests of patriarchy, the storytellers, keepers of another kind of record, comprise a counter-culture existing outside and as a challenge to it.¹⁰

Like Dinesen’s storytellers, Djébar’s “rawiyates” are keepers of another record, with their focus on women’s experiences, and their manipulation of the spoken word challenging the historians’ assumption that this era was the property of their infallible male writings. Nevertheless their stories simultaneously serve the interests of what was fast becoming the dominant culture – Islam, as the central figure in all the “rawiyates” is its leader – the Prophet Muhammad.

The third “rawiya” or story-teller is Oum Harem who relates her own and her sister’s encounters with the Prophet. Oum Harem strongly believes in women’s

⁸ Patricia Geesey, “Women’s Worlds: Assia Djébar’s *Loin de Médine*”, in Kenneth W. Harrow (ed.), *The Marabout and the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), pp. 40-50, p. 40. The *Hadith* are sayings attributed to Muhammad and brief narratives about his life and those of his Companions, transmitted orally and then written down after the death of the Prophet.

⁹ Clarisse Zimra, “Comment peut-on être musulmane?: Assia Djébar repense Médine”, p. 61.

responsibility to be “keepers of the stories of the Prophet” and insistently confronts her sister’s reluctance to take on that role. Oum Salem’s reticence is attributed to her identity as mother, a role which this more timid sister believes to be incompatible with that of a “rawiya”, because of its assumption of authority. She believes that only a man should be attributed the role of being the “official” transmitter of the stories of the Prophet, even if they are strictly speaking *her own* stories, words of the Prophet spoken to her:

- Pourquoi ce ton de secret? Pourquoi ne pas parler ainsi, avec moi, avec toutes les femmes de Médine, Migrants et ‘Ançariyates? Pourquoi?
Invariablement Oum Salem, après avoir baissé les yeux, répond;
- Anas, mon fils, transmettra plus sûrement que moi-même!
“Y a-t-il donc incompatibilité, pensai-je, entre se sentir rawiya et demeurer mère, mère fervente d’un fils tel que Anas ibn el Malik, devenu, malgré son jeune âge, un *fqih* si respectable? ... Et elle, Oum Salem?” (p. 203)

The “rawiya” is characterised by a circular structure and repetitive patterns of speech, in which Oum Harem repeats herself, and her identity throughout:

“Je suis la soeur de celle qui a offert les palmiers au Prophète.” (p. 200)

“... oui, je suis la soeur de Oum Salem” (p.200).

“Oui, je suis la soeur de Oum Salem, la mère d’Anas” (p. 201).

Whereas the form of the “rawiya’s” self-presentation foregrounds the sororal relation, challenging the patriarchal order that sees women primarily as they relate to their male relations, the story itself points away from the two sisters towards the life of the Prophet, as Oum Harem tells of “les prévenances du Prophète à son [her sister’s] égard” (p. 203), recalling words of wisdom spoken by Muhammad to Oum Salem in the intimacy of her own home, words of prayer before a meal, multiplying the bread before their eyes, and words of blessing for her bereaved sister, being fulfilled by the birth of a son to replace the one she lost.

The “Voix” sections mainly express the voices of women, speaking in the first or third person and bringing the living word and the lived experience onto the page. These are voices which by speaking for themselves, have escaped the objectifying

¹⁰ Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, “Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman”, p.

hold of the historian's pen and his written word. These voices tell the story of history as it happened, or as it could have happened, recapturing its presence, not through the uniform, single, tuneless voice of the Islamic historian writing history but through the multiple, polyphonic voices of the women speaking history.

The "voice" sections rise out of the main narrative text, reinforcing or pre-empting the narrative sections they adjoin. Thematically they are united by their demonstration of the power of the word, whether to heal or to destroy; stylistically, they are often compressed and intense, as if to reinforce that potency.

The voice of Esma bent Omaïs can be heard in between two chapters dedicated to her "La laveuse des morts", and "Celle aux mains tatouées". The first traces her symbolic role as the "laveuse" of the bodies of Fatima and Abou Bekr; the second ("Celle aux mains tatouées"), retraces her youth and charts her friendship with Fatima. Between these two narrative sections, the real Esma comes to life, her voice rising up in a heated debate with Omar ibn El Khattab, who has taken upon himself to question her religious credentials. Omar denigrates Esma's role as Islamic "ambassador" to Abyssinia as trivial compared to that of the Muslims who stayed behind and suffered with the Prophet (Esma's first husband Djaffar, a cousin of the Prophet's, went to Abyssinia as one of the first ambassadors of Islam). Esma, the speaking subject, is indignant, quick to challenge the male rebuke, and impatient to take her case to a higher "authority":

Je fais le serment le plus solennel que je ne goûterai à aucun mets, ni à aucune boisson, tant que je n'aurai pas raconté à l'Envoyé de Dieu ces paroles que je viens d'entendre, nous qui souffrions et qui étions en danger! Je veux dire tout cela au Prophète et lui demanderai, sur cela, son avis! (p. 246)

The Prophet not only takes up Esma's cause, but bestows upon her sojourn in Abyssinia the status of a pilgrimage, honouring her and her like with the title of "deux fois Migrants"

Djebar's use of "voices" can be evaluated in relation to her use of the historians' texts. The usage of historical text as a reference-point, which is frequent in Section 1 (8 instances), becomes less frequent in Sections 2 and 3 (5 altogether) and then disappears in the final section. This diminishing number of references goes hand in hand with a corresponding increase in the number of Voice sections cutting through the narrative (2 in sections 1 and 2, 3 in sections 3, and 4 in section 4), as if the women of *Médine* are first liberated from the constricting grasp of the historian's pen, by being given form/shape, but then undergo a more dramatic liberation, by being given an autonomous voice which no longer needs to rely on the original written word for its existence. Like Cixous, Djebar allows her writing to be increasingly dominated by the immediacy and transparency of the voice: "La féminité dans l'écriture je la sens passer d'abord par: un privilège de la voix..."¹¹

The act of reconstruction in the "narrative" sections, especially in Part 1, takes as its starting-point documented Islamic historical sources, lending a convincing historical weight to these accounts, which again mainly focus on the experience of women. Transformed by Djebar's "imagination de cinéaste", the quick sketches provided by these historians are fleshed out, as Djebar creates for each unsung heroine a set, costumes and a script. Prodding deeper still, Djebar proceeds to reach into the recesses of the minds of women such as Fatima, resurrecting them not only in body, but also in spirit.

The section dedicated to "la fille aimée" opens with Fatima's death at the age of twenty eight. A historical sketch, short on detail, deliberately and ironically cites the impoverished accounts of the historians:

- On the day of her death: "Rien d'autre sur ce jour au soleil brûlant de Médine..."
- On her daughter's upbringing: "Nous aurons droit alors à la brève précision: Oum Keltoum a été élevée d'une façon austère, à l'image de son père et de sa mère."
- On her marriage: "Rien de plus à ajouter, sinon que Fatima, au cours de sa vie conjugale, fut l'unique épouse de son cousin Ali." (pp. 59, 60)

¹¹ Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*, p. 170.

Countering the dryness of these evocations of Fatima's life, Djebbar attempts to capture her essence, by a lyrical evocation of her sense of loss and emptiness after the death of her father. The emotional void gives way to the historical void, filled on a symbolic level by Djebbar's accolade:

Comme si la présence de la fille aimée, une fois son père mort, s'avérait un blanc, un creux, quasiment une faille... Qui durera six mois à peine. Fatima mise au tombeau, les descendants premiers du Prophète sont deux garçonnets, les quasi-jumeaux que Mohammed a si souvent tenus sur ses genoux!

Mais pas une femme, si pure, si austère, si épouse unique fût-elle! (p. 60)

Whereas Virginia Woolf gives us "Shakespeare's sister"¹², Djebbar here presents us with "Fatima's brother", or the son the Prophet never had: "Si Fatima avait été un fils". Djebbar proceeds to recall the scene of the Prophet's deathbed, a death which gave birth to the issue of succession, confused by Mohammed's lack of male heirs, and complicated further by his request for an unspecified scribe. Three were convoked (two fathers-in-law, later to be appointed Caliphs, and his cousin Ali, husband of Fatima): "Voyant trois personnes au lieu d'une seulement désirée, Muhammed détourne la tête et garde le silence. Quelque temps après, il meurt: sur-le-champ, l'incertitude sur la succession et sur son mode, sur la personne même du successeur, est présente." (p. 61).

The divided, multiple corpus of Islam seems to emanate from the divided, multiple loyalties of the Prophet: "Comme si le corps de l'Islam devait se diviser, enfanter par lui-même luttes civiles et querelles, tout cela en tribut payé à la polygamie du Fondateur" (p. 61). Djebbar speculates that the whole history of Islam, beset by bitter and bloody civil wars because of the absence of an authoritative word from the Prophet on his succession, might have been different had a "male Fatima" existed, the son to whom the secret of succession would inevitably have been revealed.

The daughter of the prophet in her public role is "au premier plan du théâtre islamique", as mother of the three martyrs, yet Djebbar wants to capture Fatima

¹² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 1945), p. 112.

backstage, by herself, to discover Fatima the woman, rather than Fatima the daughter:

Rêver à Fatima personnellement, en dehors de son père, de son époux, de ses fils, et se dire que peut-être - (qui l'a perçu, l'a écrit ou l'a transmis, osant par là même un péché de lèse-majesté...), - oui, peut-être que Fatima, dès sa nubilité ou en cours d'adolescence, s'est voulue garçon. Inconsciemment. A la fois Fille (pour la tendresse) et Fils (pour la continuité) de son père. (p. 63)

The emotion of tenderness, which is symbolically extended to all the Prophet's relations to women in the novel, above all epitomises the portrayal of his relationship to Fatima. Djebbar will take hold of this emotion, which in this novel will come to figure as the founding stone upon which Djebbar will construct her presentation of the Prophet as the idealised father-figure. The terrible consequences of the succession vacuum are irrevocably and tragically linked to Fatima, both because she was not and could not be "le fils aimé", and because her sons would be at the heart of its tragic development. But just as Fatima's desire to be male is not consciously voiced, Djebbar too does not consciously challenge the male system of succession that underlies that desire. Nevertheless, later in the novel, she comes closer to that position, not by directly suggesting that Fatima should have been allowed to take on her father's political mantle, but by representing her as her father's *spiritual* heir.

The Subject of the novel

Woman-as-subject

If *Loin de Médine* thus appears to succeed in the feminist project of reconstructing female experience, to what extent does it meet the second objective of feminist scholarship, that of deconstructing male patterns of thinking and social practice? Does the novel take a stand against the patriarchal understanding of woman which denies her subjectivity and her role in society? How far do Djebbar's women escape the compulsive masculine force which denies their constitution as a subject, providing "l'hypothèque garante de toute constitution irréductible d'objet: de représentation, de discours, de désir."¹³

¹³ Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), p. 165.

Loin de Médine was written in the aftermath of the Algerian riots of 1988, which acted as catalyst for this act of repossession: "Les barbus m'ont conspuée. Une femme n'avait pas le droit d'écrire sur le Prophète... C'est une oeuvre de circonstance. J'ai eu besoin, devant ce sang qui coulait, de me porter témoin, de dire: 'cette religion n'appartient pas qu'à vous'".¹⁴ Yet can Islam be taken out of the hands of men and reclaimed for women? Can Djébar celebrate the subjectivity of the woman not only of the pre-Islamic age, but also of early Islam, an era which is traditionally seen as encroaching on her freedoms? Or are the women of early Islam in fact, as Djébar suggests, a liberated sex, who can be truly seen as the *subjects* of *Loin de Médine*?

According to Lerner, it is difficult to define the status of women within a given society, because no single criterion can be singled out (i.e. women's role in economics, or religion, or the family, or reproduction, or sexual life etc.), as the determining factor of her position. Furthermore losses in one area of life can mean, or can be accompanied by gains in another.¹⁵

The world of *Médine* is one in which woman has considerable status and power, defying the traditional separation of Islamic society into the "public" and "private" spheres. This is not a world where woman is relegated to a domestic prison or where her childbearing role "naturally" restricts her to the home. On the contrary, *Loin de Médine* takes a stand against a patriarchal understanding of woman which views her "not in terms of relationship - with other women and with men - but of difference and apartness ... as beings who *are* and have at all times been not actors but mere subjects of male action and female biology."¹⁶ In evaluating Djébar's assessment of woman's social status in this early Islamic age, to use Lerner's terms, the "criteria" I have selected here are women's role in warfare, religious life and sexuality.

¹⁴ Clarisse Zimra refers to this quotation of Djébar's made in January 1992 in "Comment peut-on être musulmane?", p. 57.

¹⁵ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 81-82.

¹⁶ Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding", *Signs* (Spring 1980), 5, 3, pp. 389-417, p. 409. Quoted in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman", p. 16.

Loin de Médine creates the impression of women in movement, fearlessly conquering "l'espace", and confidently taking possession of the outside world. The references in the novel to "femmes en mouvement" resonate with 1970s French feminist undertones, recalling the title of the magazine *Femmes en mouvement*, published by *des femmes*. For Clarisse Zimra, it is woman's repossession of the outside world or "la question de l'espace", the founding theme in which the novel is firmly grounded, which forms the basis of the novel's continuity with all Djébar's preceding works.¹⁷

The "space" which is most dramatically conquered in *Loin de Médine* is the battlefield. Participating in and even leading in battle, the women of *Loin de Médine* are included in the world of war, an arena that has traditionally been seen as the ultimate male prerogative, not only as the most exclusive of male activities, but as the activity which has "earned" man's superiority over women:

Le guerrier pour augmenter le prestige de la horde, du clan auquel il appartient, met en jeu sa propre vie. Et par là il prouve avec éclat que ce n'est pas la vie qui est pour l'homme la valeur suprême mais qu'elle doit servir des fins plus importantes qu'elle-même. La pire malédiction qui pèse sur la femme c'est qu'elle est exclue de ces expéditions guerrières; ce n'est pas en donnant la vie, c'est en risquant la vie que l'homme s'élève au-dessus de l'animal; c'est pourquoi dans l'humanité la supériorité est accordée non au sexe qui engendre mais à celui qui tue."¹⁸

Both the pre-Islamic women and those converted in the early years of Islam (during the Prophet's life and until shortly after his death) were preserved from this "curse" of exclusion from the mainstay of manhood, and participated in war not just as nurse-maidens, but as battle-hungry warriors. Djébar recalls women such as Selma, daughter of Malik, chief of the Beni Ghatafan who, hearing of her brother's death by Islamic hands, takes up his mantle as "reine de clan", and sets out with her troops to avenge him: "La femme rebelle, abritée dans sa litière et installée au coeur même du danger, excite ses hommes de la voix" (p. 38).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 111.

Other warrior-women emerge, such as Sajdah, from Mossoul, a woman of Christian origin, founder of a new religion, a heady cocktail of Islam and Christianity, who is impatient to impose her faith and her authority, to conquer “des terres en même temps que les consciences”, with the aid of her four hundred soldiers. Khalid, leader of the Islamic armies is confronted with a woman who has taken her destiny into her own hands, who bows to no earthly or spiritual authority but her own: “... la menace d’une liberté incontrôlée est concrétisée par une femme” (p. 43).

Although Sajdah’s story illustrates the acceptance of women as participants, and even leaders in battle in pre-Islamic Arabia, the position of the early converts to Islam is more complex. Djébar tells the story of Oum Hakim who fights on the side of the Islamic armies in her youth and also in her later years. But in the intervening period, while she is married to Ikrima, she is forbidden by her husband to fight; while the object of Ikrima’s authority, she can no longer act out her destiny.

Within her new faith Oum Hakim is both free and forbidden to do battle, both fighting subject and object of male authority. Djébar makes the point that Islam did not prohibit woman’s right to fight and that Oum Hakim’s temporary loss of freedom is the consequence of her husband’s decree, not the consequence of Islamic law. However I suggest that a direct link between this loss of autonomy and the impact of Islam can be established. For despite the fact that Oum Hakim was “technically” free to fight under the banner of Islam, her own temporary exclusion, and the general exclusion of women from war that was to follow, can be seen as the inevitable result of the new Islamic régime. For the hierarchical marriage system it instituted ensured that the decision-making process reverted to the male, and that it would only be a matter of time before the new patriarchs of Islam, following in the footsteps of Ikrima, would ban “their” women completely from war.

In a scene set in Médine shortly before the Prophet’s death, Oum Hakim and her female companions remark that their participation in warfare has a profound effect on their husbands’ conduct: “Nous, nous sortons avec nos hommes! intervint une Mecquoise que Oum Hakim ne reconnut pas. Nous les accompagnons, y compris au combat, et c’est pourquoi ils vont rarement vers les femmes de peu” (p. 157). Warfare, Djébar suggests, confers upon women a sense of subjectivity which, as

Irigaray would have it, allows them to enter into subject-to-subject relations with the opposite sex. Moreover, she suggests that the desire for battle is not merely motivated by the desire to regain a lost sense of intimacy with her husband: ("retrouver le passé et son rythme; savoir si une vie à deux restait possible, grâce au risque et à son ivresse" p. 157), but by a desire is to "show them", the leaders of Médine (and by implication, the leaders of today), that women did, could and still should, move freely between the private and public worlds:

Se battre. Se battre à cheval, ou à dos de chamelle, et pour l'Islam dorénavant. Leur montrer à eux, les chefs de Médine, les fameux Compagnons que, même du clan vaincu, ces femmes de La Mecque restaient des dames. A la fois des épouses, des maîtresses de maison, mais aussi des combattantes. (p. 157)

Far from being relegated to the fringes of religious life, the women of *Loin de Médine* speak out loud and clear in the name of religion. The power of these women is exemplified in the prophetic authority of non-Muslim women of the time, but also, most strikingly, in the images of the two women closest to the Prophet, Fatima, his beloved daughter, and Aïcha, his favourite wife: "Parole donc de la contestation et, à l'autre extrême, parole de la transmission" (p. 337). Djébar portrays both women as guardians of the true spirit of Islam, Fatima defending it, and Aïcha transmitting it to posterity.

Fatima is "Celle qui dit non à Médine" (p. 72). The refusal which Fatima proclaims after her father's death is directed against his male successors, the new leaders of Islam, who want to deprive her of her inheritance, basing their argument on a "convenient" distortion of the following words of the Prophet's: "Nous, les prophètes, aurait dit Mohammed un jour, on n'hérite pas de nous! Ce qui nous est donné nous est donné en don!" (p. 85).

Actively resisting their attempt to disinherit her, proclaiming her "non" fearlessly, authoritatively and yet ultimately unsuccessfully, in a public space, and in front of Abou Bekr and the Companions, Fatima becomes one of the first victims of Islamic legalism, whose material loss is but a pale reflection of a far deeper wound, that of her spiritual disenfranchisement. Angered by their dismissal of her prophetic gift,

Fatima becomes a symbol of "opposition féminine", opposed not to the faith of her beloved father, but to male distortion of the true spirit of Islam.

Aïcha too is a role-model, a symbol of female religious authority, as her stories become part of the fabric of Islam. Djebbar visualises her words as resisting the heavy formulaic prose of the Islamic writer, their lyricism liberating rather than imprisoning the true spirit of Islam: "Ce faisant, elle trouve les mots: les mots qui n'emmailotent pas les jours d'hier, non, qui les dénudent. Les phrases qui ne durcissent pas en formules; qui restent poésie" (p. 339).

Djebbar foregrounds the importance of Aïcha's "parole" in her central role in transmitting the stories of the Prophet, linking that religious role with her symbolic role as mother of the children of Islam:

Elle perçoit faiblement le sens de ces mots "mère des...". Soudain une aile d'archange semble frémir au-dessus d'elle. Elle a à nourrir les autres, elle a à entretenir le souvenir, le long ruban drapé des gestes, des mots, des soupirs et des sourires du Messager - que la grâce du Seigneur lui soit accordée! Vivre le souvenir pour "eux", les Croyants, tous les Croyants - oui, les vieux, les jeunes, les maigres, les pansus, les vertueux, les hésitants'.

Aïcha, "mère des Croyants" parce que première des rawiyates. (p. 332).

According to Leila Ahmed, it is significant that women, and Aïcha in particular, were important contributors to the oral texts of Islam, which were eventually transcribed into written form by men, contributing to the official history of Islam and the literature that established the normative practices of Islamic society - the *hadith*. For Ahmed, "the very fact of women's contribution to this important literature indicates that at least the first generation of Muslims, the generation closest to *Jahilia* days and *Jahilia* attitudes towards women - and their immediate descendants, had no difficulty accepting women as authorities."¹⁹

Djebbar, using the examples of Fatima and Aïcha, also draws attention to the fact that the women of early Islam were accepted as religious authorities. For despite the fact that Fatima was ultimately disinherited by her father's successors, Djebbar

¹⁹ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam : Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 47.

foregrounds her self-assurance in public and the power she wields over her audiences, demonstrating that she was a force to be reckoned with, and that she, like Aïcha, assumed a natural religious authority.

However Djébar and Ahmed differ as to their interpretation of the reasons behind the “closures” that were to ensue for women, as their religious authority was gradually undermined. The example of Fatima in *Loin de Médine* foregrounds male misappropriation of the Koran as the reason behind Fatima’s disinheritance, and, by implication, as the reason behind subsequent “closures”. Ahmed, in contrast, views the losses of female autonomy not as the result of male exploitation of the true spirit of Islam but as the inevitable result of *the Islamic system itself*, which instituted a “hierarchical type of marriage”(p. 63), legitimising the husband’s decisions to curtail his wife’s freedoms. She suggests that the autonomy and authority which women enjoyed in the early days of Islam are not, as Djébar implies, an inherent element of the new religion, but rather a residue of *pre-Islamic* freedoms.

The system of marriage which Islam established as the blue-print for sexual relationships ensured that the freedoms gained in the *Jahilia* age were slowly and inevitably eroded. Moreover, it is in the area of sexuality where it is most difficult not to relate the losses entailed for women to the new Islamic system rather than to subsequent misappropriations of the religion. The old system of “marriage” in pre-Islamic Arabia had granted women a degree of sexual autonomy which was clamped down upon by the new family structure imposed by Islam. This new structure was aimed at legalising male superiority, and protecting the interests of patriarchy: “La polygamie, la répudiation, l’interdiction de commettre *zina* [fornication, adultery] (qui concerne surtout les femmes, puisque les hommes avaient droit à plusieurs partenaires légitimes) et les garanties de paternité sont autant d’institutions qui ont contribué à favoriser la transition entre l’ancienne structure, où la famille reposait sur une certaine *auto-détermination* des femmes, et la nouvelle structure, où la famille repose sur le principe de la *suprématie masculine*.”²⁰

²⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, Idéologie, Islam* (Paris:Tièrce, 1983), pp. 59-60. [My emphasis]

As in Dinesen's tale, women under Islam became hostages to the concept of male honour. The cult of virginity, symbolised by Isak Dinesen's bloodstained sheets, and its corollary, the fear of *zina*, established the preservation of the honour of the male (father, husband, brother) as the new driving-force behind the society of Islamic Arabia. The identity of a woman was now linked to her sexuality, which was now to be perceived as a dangerous, uncontrolled force to be contained within a strict family structure.

Various theories exist as to the conception of pre-Islamic marriages at the time of the Prophet. All, however, attest to the coexistence of a variety of types of marriages, including both matrilineal and patrilineal. Robertson Smith describes two of these as the "sadica" [friend, or marriage of friendship], and "ba'al" [property, or marriage of property] marriages.²¹ In the "sadica" marriage, where the children and wife belonged to the *wife's* tribe, the wife could banish her husband at will. Physical paternity was not significant and the woman's chastity did not have a social function. In the patrilineal "ba'al" marriage, however, where the child belonged to the father's tribe, and where proof of physical paternity was paramount, the woman's chastity was required in establishing physical paternity.

A more complex but complementary account of pre-Islamic sexual unions emerges from the records of Al Buchtari, as transmitted by Aïcha, who cited four types of marriage prevalent in the pre-Islamic age. Two of these were polyandrous, the wife having as many husbands as she wanted. Although there is this evidence of polygyny before Islam, the type which the Prophet practiced, virilocal polygyny, was rare.²² According to Mernissi, polygyny in the pre-Islamic matrilineal context probably entailed a husband visiting his different wives where they resided with their tribes, just as wives might have been visited by different husbands. In three out of four of "Aïcha's marriages", there is no emphasis on physical paternity, and therefore the notion of female chastity was absent.²³

²¹ W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1903), p. 94.

²² Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 44.

²³ Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, Idéologie, Islam*, p. 76.

By transferring the rights to women's sexuality and her offspring from the woman and her tribe to man, and then by basing the new definition of marriage on that "proprietary male right", Islam changed the balance of power between the sexes: "Implicit in this new order was the male right to control women and to interdict their interactions with other men".²⁴ According to Ahmed, the ground was now prepared for the closures that would follow: "... women's exclusion from social activities in which they might have contact with men other than those with rights to their sexuality; their physical seclusion, soon to become the norm; and the institution of internal mechanisms of control, such as instilling the notion of submission as a woman's duty."²⁵

Although the transition to Islamic mores was intended to "civilise" what Beauvoir calls "les hordes primitives", Mernissi points to the irony of such an assumption, and to the fundamental patriarchal bias which underlies it:

"... ce qui est curieux dans la sexualité musulmane en tant que sexualité civilisée est la contradiction fondamentale entre la sexualité de la femme et celle de l'homme: s'il est vrai que promiscuité et laxisme sont la marque d'un certain barbarisme, alors la seule sexualité qui ait été civilisée par l'Islam est celle de la femme. La sexualité de l'homme est caractérisée par la promiscuité (du fait de la polygamie) et le laxisme (du fait de la répudiation)."²⁶

Within *Loin de Médine*'s multivalent framework, Djébar celebrates the sexual autonomy of pre-Islamic woman, but also attempts to show that women in early Islamic marriages also had a certain autonomy. In the areas where autonomy was maintained (women for example had the right to initiate and refuse proposals of marriage²⁷), this message is reinforced in *Loin de Médine*. Where, in contrast, her autonomy is stripped, rather than challenging the position of male supremacy, *Loin de Médine* glosses over these "closures", obscuring the consequences they entailed for women.

²⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam*, p. 62.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

²⁷ *Loin de Médine* offers examples of this practise: Oum Salama turns down Abou Bekr, second Caliph of Islam (p. 55), and the Prophet himself receives various offers of marriage, including that of an unnamed young girl (p. 122), suggesting that this custom overrode social status.

So, rather than condemn Islam's endorsement of male polygyny, Djébar focuses on the fulfillment and intimacy of couples living within such polygamous relationships: "... l'expérience de l'amour conjugal - vécu sans doute en passion unique au coeur de la polygamie" (p. 238). Djébar foregrounds the capacity for "une passion unique" within polygamous unions. Thus Esma, twice widowed, three times married to polygamous husbands, is "Esma, l'amoureuse. Esma à la vie pleine qui goûta trois vies de femme et qui, dans chacune, fut vraiment femme" (p. 267). The positive emphasis on the physical intimacy of the couple within a polygamous union is achieved at the expense of any feminist critique of a practice which gave the husband, but not the wife, the right to several sexual unions.

Similarly, the male prerogative on divorce is glossed over in the story of Oum Keltoum's second marriage to Zubeir, Ibn el Awwam. Here again the spiritual dimension of the story obscures the underlying problem of a system of divorce which privileges the husband at the expense of his wife. Oum Keltoum rebels against her new husband who ignores her repeated pleas for a divorce: "- Je désire que tu me répudies! finit-elle par dire à l'heure de la prière, un après-midi, à Zubeir entré chez elle. Il la regarda. Ne lui répondit rien" (p. 194). Her release from marriage finally comes thanks to a moment of divine intervention, when she surprises her husband at the hour of prayer:

Zubeir qui va s'adresser à Dieu, qui allège son esprit de ses soucis, de ses colères, de son désir hostile, Zubeir, surpris, s'est tourné vers elle; elle, la rétive. Encore habité de l'idée de Dieu, vers lequel humblement il désire s'approcher, il répond cette fois d'emblée, sans réfléchir:

- Femme, par Dieu, tu es répudiée! (p. 195)

By foregrounding this instance of divine reprieve and female freedom, *Loin de Médine* distances itself from direct criticism of Islam's reductive divorce laws. The Islamic God, if not the Islamic laws, is on the side of woman. In her desire to portray Islamic women as autonomous subjects, Djébar represses the patriarchal bias of Islam's marriage system.

The Prophet - the real subject or the other subject ?

How does this desire to represent Islamic women as *subjects* relate to Djébar's portrayal of the Prophet as the author of Islam? Can her women be free if they are the objects of Prophetic authority? Djébar's treatment of the Prophet reveals an underlying tension within the work. Roland Barthes, describing the practice, in narration, of privileging one subject over another, states that the subject can also be double: "This dual is all the more interesting in that it relates to the subject of certain (very modern) games, in which two equal opponents try to gain possession of an object put into circulation by a referee".²⁸ The dual or duel being fought out in *Loin de Médine* is between the two competing subjects: *woman-as-subject* and the *Prophet-as-subject*. Is the subject of the novel the women who speak out from within the golden frame of Dinesen's tale, or is it the Prophet whose emblem, like that of the golden crown, adorns its golden plate, casting its objectifying shadow over the women contained within the frame?

Although the framework of *Loin de Médine* is polyvalent, encompassing the women of both pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabia, the emblem of Islam, in the shape of the person of the Prophet, is inscribed throughout the work, as the Prophet's voice both literally and metaphorically speaks throughout its pages. How can the woman-as-subject, voice set free, the voice of freedom, coexist with the Prophet-as-subject, the Voice of authority?

In contrast to the portrayal of women-as-subject in both the private and public domains, with the emphasis on the latter, the picture given of Mohammed is one which is very much concentrated on the private, the personal, and the spiritual. By elevating the voice of the prophet to a mystical force, by foregrounding Islam's spiritual dimension, Djébar suppresses its pragmatic side, with its strong patriarchal bias, leaving behind a Voice which speaks with, for, and alongside woman.

Ahmed explains the seemingly "inexplicable" contention made by many Muslim women, that Islam is not sexist, as a consequence of what she describes as the "two

distinct voices within Islam, and the two competing understandings of gender, one expressed in the pragmatic regulations for society", based on a patriarchal notion of gender, and the other on "the articulation of an ethical vision", proclaiming an egalitarian conception of gender.²⁹ Ahmed notes that these tensions are contained within the Koran itself, which despite appearing to consolidate marriage as a hierarchical institution contains verses which appear to qualify this position.³⁰ Also of considerable significance is the affirmation of woman's right to inherit and control property and income without reference to male guardians, "a most crucial area with regard to personal autonomy, qualifying the institution of male control as an all-encompassing system".³¹

Ahmed goes so far as to say that "Islam's ethical vision, which is stubbornly egalitarian, including with respect to the sexes, is thus in tension with, and might even be seen to subvert, the hierarchical structure of marriage pragmatically instituted in the first Islamic society."³²

So it is the ethical, egalitarian voice of Islam which speaks through Djebbar's Prophet, a voice which rises above and drowns out the accusations of patriarchy directed at the pragmatic practices of Islam. In Djebbar's representation of the prophet she foregrounds the private man, the Prophet at home with his family, who emerges as the idealised father-figure, both in relation to his beloved daughter Fatima, and in relation to the other daughters of Islam, to whom this relationship is symbolically extended. It is his voice, the Voice of the Father, rather than the voice of the Mother which corresponds to Cixous's primeval song: "The voice in each woman, moreover is not only her own, but springs from the deepest layers of her psyche: her own speech becomes the echo of the primeval *song* she once heard, the voice the

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, Stephen Heath (ed.), (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 108. From "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits", in Roland Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes*, tome 2 [1966-1973] (Paris:Seuil, 1994), p. 93.

²⁹ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, pp. 65-66.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 63. Ahmed points out specific Koranic verses which qualify marriage as a hierarchical institution - ie. verses proclaiming that women have corresponding rights to men (Sura 2: 229), verses directing men who wish to be polygamous to treat all their wives equally, but implying that this is an impossible ideal (such verses are open to being read to mean that men should not be polygamous), verses sanctioning divorce but which proceed to condemn it as being abhorrent to God.

³¹ Ibid., p. 63.

³² Ibid., p. 63.

incarnation of the 'first voice of love which all women preserve alive ... in each woman sings the first nameless love' ... the Voice of the Mother..."³³

Loin de Médine's primeval song is the song of the Prophet, a song which resonates deep into the heart of its hearers, women such as Oum Hakim, whose story illustrates the mystical power of His voice. On the day of "le sermon de l'Adieu", Mohammed's last public appearance, Oum Hakim is drawn towards the thronging crowd, and then to the Voice. The Voice which transforms her life is compelling, drawing her to itself in an almost mystical way: "Elle sortit dans le matin ensoleillé. Elle se découvrait une hâte irraisonnée: dépasser ces rangées d'auditeurs, se rapprocher de quoi, sinon de la voix qui se gonflait maintenant, qui prenait de l'ampleur, qui s'éloignait puis revenait. Oum Hakim, comme dans un rêve, se dirigeait avec la même hâte vers l'avant" (p.161). Despite herself, she is completely taken over by his presence: "Se rapprochant du lieu où il se tenait, Oum Hakim se sentait en état de ne plus rien entendre, de ne plus rien comprendre. Figée, tendue tout entière à regarder, à... (plus tard, elle songea sans oser le dire: 'à témoigner')" (p.162). And, as the Voice takes on a powerful intensity, she is carried onto a higher plane: "Oum Hakim percevait, comme voguant à travers d'autres sphères, la voix aérienne de Mohammed" (p.163).

The representation of the Prophet foregrounds not only the impact of his spiritual power, but also by the emotion of tenderness which he bestows liberally on his daughter Fatima and to all the daughters of Islam. In *Loin de Médine* the Prophet's communications with women are characterised not only by tenderness and compassion, but also by light-heartedness:

Puis il rit, il rit ouvertement. Moi, bouleversée, j'ai répondu, des larmes dans la voix... (p. 42) [conversation with Aïcha]
Et la douceur de ses paroles illumina la face de la nouvelle adoptée. (p.101) [conversation with Habiba]
... le Prophète resta les yeux baissés, comme s'il souffrait de l'émoi si vif de l'épouse de Djaffar ibn Abou Talib. (p. 246)

The Prophet's relationship to woman is, however, at its most striking in his spiritual "bonding" with Fatima. Djebbar evokes their intense relationship, recreating a scene

³³ Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 114.

shortly before the Prophet's death, where Fatima finds him lost in a trance. The extremes of emotions portrayed reinforce the mystical intensity of the scene:

Elle pleure, ployée en silence; elle se déchire, sans nulle réponse au père. Elle mêle seulement ses larmes contagieuses à celles du malade. Qui reprend toutefois son discours, qui murmure à nouveau une ou deux phrases.

Alors Fatima brusquement consolée s'illumine; son visage encore en larmes s'éclaire d'une joie enfantine; elle sourit; elle rit. A nouveau penchée sur le père gisant, elle lui fait partager sa joie; et celui-ci de s'éclairer de cette volubilité filiale... Père et fille dans les larmes, puis dans l'égouttement pour ainsi dire du bonheur survenant, *fusant enfin de toutes parts*. (p. 65) [My emphasis]

In this portrayal of Mohammed, Djébar is in fact privileging what is perceived in traditional terms as the "feminine side" of the Prophet's character, the adjectives "doux", "tendre", his ready capacity for emotions, his propensity for tears breaking down the hierarchical male/female opposition between them. But here it is not man but The Man, "Mohammed avec son auréole de dernier des Prophètes mais aussi sa présence toute humaine", the Prophet, who in his bonding/fusing with Fatima - "Père et fille ... fusant de toutes parts" - breaks down the divide, crosses out the bar, transcends the relationship of otherness, for a woman, if not all women "est une partie de [lui]-même" - Fatima, not part of the eternal mother figure, forever linked in semiotic harmony, but Fatima the beloved daughter, eternally linked to the ideal father in a relationship of spiritual equality, defying the otherness which patriarchal Islam has since been trying to impose on its "second sex" (p. 237, p. 72).

The dual/duel between the competing subjects of Médine, woman-as-subject and the Prophet-as-subject, is to some extent resolved by Djébar's obscuring the "difference" between the Prophet-as-man and Fatima-as-woman, by her refusing to oppose them in a power relationship of man/woman and by allowing them to relate as equal subjects bound by a mystical spiritual relationality.

Djébar presents us with a new non-hierarchical Islam, not only by foregrounding the Prophet's relationship with Fatima, but also by the implication that the very authorship of Islam is shared by women, women who are the *mothers of Islam* - or

“les femmes qui firent l’Islam.”³⁴ The decision to present the personal side of the Prophet, the Messenger “at home”, rather than “at work” serves to emphasise the influential role women had in his life, and by implication, in the formation of both the message and the future of Islam.³⁵ In *Loin de Médine* women are seen to share the *authorship* of Islam, and, as such retain a measure of their subjecthood. Their faith is not an exclusively male faith, with a single, all-powerful male Author, but a faith in which women shared in its beginnings, its creation, and in which the “mères des Croyants” gave birth to its future.

The concept of the shared authorship of Islam is communicated in *Loin de Médine* by stories showing how the Koran was inspired by the lives of individual women - women such as Oum Keltoum, “la fugueuse”, who at the age of fifteen left her family at Mecca to join the Prophet and his followers at Medina. Threatened by her brothers, this adolescent girl becomes the subject of prophetic inspiration, her brothers’ attempts to recapture her prompting the *sura* protecting the lives of converted women who have to flee their families: “Des décennies durant, il suffira qu’une fugueuse répâtât ces deux phrases du Prophète - rapportées par son épouse Aïcha - pour que, jeune ou vieille, forte ou faible, elle soit sauvegardée, mise sous protection islamique et, en aucun cas, renvoyée à un père, à des frères, à un mari...” (p 187).

Also lending weight to this concept of shared authorship is the image of an Islamic “family tree” of which women such as Oum Fadl, sister of Maïmouna, “mère des Croyants”, are the roots:

Oum Fadl dont le premier fils, Fadl, s’est occupé de l’ensevelissement du Prophète avec Ali et Abbas, dont le second, Abdallah, deviendra plus tard un des plus célèbres commentateurs du Coran, Oum Fadl se sent peu à peu comme une première mémoire pour les Musulmanes. Au centre de la famille du Prophète - lui qui n’a pas eu de fils et dont presque toutes les filles sont mortes - Oum Fadl porte en elle tout un passé récent, brûlant comme une braise! (pp. 57-58).

³⁴ Clarisse Zimra, “Comment peut-on être musulmane?”, in *notre librairie* 118, p. 60.

³⁵ Although sources vary, the best substantiated evidence suggests that Muhammad had eleven wives and two concubines.

Femmes-mères, femmes-épouses, filles-héritières

Despite the tributes to women, and to the “mères des Croyants”, the role of motherhood in the relational (rather than the genealogical sense) is deliberately bypassed in *Loin de Médine*, as Djébar displaces the feminists’ privileged mother-child relationship with the father-daughter bond. The mother-child relationship is absent, not only in the portrayal of the Prophet’s family, but also in the portrayal of “les femmes insoumises”. Their identity is as women, not as mothers; it is established in being actors, not in being “mere subjects of male action and female biology”.³⁶ Those who have converted to Islam, “les soumises”, are, similarly, not represented within mother-daughter relationships but within husband-wife, and father-daughter configurations.

In the chapter entitled Esma, “la laveuse des morts”, Esma bent Omaïs (who was to wash and embalm the body of Fatima, and in later years that of Abou Bekr) figures as part of a symbolic chain of relationships in which the role of motherhood is deliberately excluded, a chain which includes the Prophet himself, Fatima (daughter of the Prophet and friend of Esma), Abou Bekr (father of Aïcha, friend of the Prophet and first caliph of Islam), Aïcha (wife of the Prophet, daughter of Abou Bekr), and Esma (wife of Abou Bekr and friend of Fatima).

Djébar builds up a web of relationships, weaving in and out of the five figures tightening “le fil invisible” around one and then the other, highlighting the bonds of intimacy between them, then loosening the thread, allowing the bond to be examined more closely. The invisible thread winds round and round the five figures in a configuration bringing together man with man by the intermediary of women - Esma, Fatima and Aïcha linking the prophet and his caliph in multiple bonds of marriage, friendship and kinship: “Ainsi la mort pour le ‘Nabi’[Prophet] et pour son vicaire deviendra vraiment fraternelle, rapprochant les deux hommes, si proches de leur vivant, par double, par triple intercession féminine” (p. 237) It is as if the different threads of Islam are brought together by women, women who relate to men not as

³⁶ Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, “The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding”, p. 409. Quoted in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, “Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman”, p. 16.

mothers, but as daughters and wives. The thread which links these men and women is now transposed into another, more mystical plane, acquiring an almost dream-like quality, as the group of four is highlighted against the radiant Father-figure:

Une sorte de jeu éclatant et abstrait, un mouvement intérieur translucide se lie et se délie autour de ce groupe de figures: Mohammed avec son auréole de dernier des Prophètes mais aussi sa présence tout humaine, Abou Bekr en face, et de l'autre côté Aïcha, jeune femme de dix-huit ans liée aux deux hommes, puis Fatima silhouette à la fois mélancolique et indomptable, sous l'éclat presque unique du Père, enfin, en arrière de celle-ci, dans son ombre, Esma les mains tendues vers Fatima, les yeux encore levés vers Abou Bekr qui va disparaître. (p. 237)

In this "tableau" or picture of "les hommes et les femmes qui firent l'Islam", now so closely linked and interwoven as to defy their "différence", and their differences, the light of Islam, "l'éclat du Père" is shining brightly onto the frame, radiating directly onto Fatima's face, light which is then diffused onto the surrounding figures. The stillness of these motionless, statue-like images contrasts with the inner movement incessantly weaving them together, as Esma, the symbol of a healing link, finally brings together Fatima and Abou Bekr, whose bitter alienation in life would be the catalyst for the bitter fracturation of Islam.

Djebar then shines her torch on the absent Mother-figure, which she associates not with Islam, but with the cult of Mary which "shaped by pagan obsessions with fertility and chastity, has already made a fetish of virginity and motherhood":³⁷

Pour ces deux hommes dont le destin s'accomplit dans son ampleur à quarante ans et au-delà, la mère, toutefois, est absente. Ce rôle, de nos jours surévalué dans le vécu masculin musulman, était quasiment évacué.

L'Islam, en son commencement, se contente d'adopter les valeurs de la maternité à travers Marie, mère de Jésus... Le thème de la maternité a été tellement glorifié, célébré à satiété durant les sept siècles chrétiens qui ont précédé, qu'il semble normal de le voir alors reculer. (p. 238)

In her criticism of the traditional perception of motherhood Djebar's view conforms to that of feminists who view motherhood as the basis for women's oppression: "she [Kristeva] has claimed that it is not *woman* as such who is repressed by patriarchal

society but *motherhood*.”³⁸ But rather than viewing Islam as part of the problem of patriarchy, “the prevailing religion of the entire planet”³⁹, Djébar displaces the powerless Christian *femme-mère* onto the powerful Islamic *filles-héritières*. As the powerless “femme-mère” recedes into the background, the powerful female figures of Islam rise up: “Les femmes-épouses, les filles héritières se lèvent, elles, en cette aurore de l’Islam, dans une modernité neuve” (p. 238). Thus, claims Djébar, women of Islam were not originally defined as “femmes-mères”, in relationships of subservience to man and child, but as “femmes-épouses” in relationships of equality and love, or as “filles-héritières” in relationships of power, producing a sexual and economic revolution the world was not yet ready for, “l’insupportable révolution féministe de l’Islam en ce VII^e siècle chrétien!” (p. 86).

Ideological collision?

Can Djébar thus really reclaim Islam for women or is this a contradictory position to uphold? The ambiguity of her position is revealed in the structure of her language. In the “tableau” of the five figures, Fatima’s silhouette is visualised “sous l’éclat *presque unique* du Père” [My emphasis]. Is it that the figure of Fatima is lit up *almost completely* by the Father’s radiant being, or is it the radiance itself, “l’éclat”, which is not unique, but almost unique, the Truth or almost all the truth, the “almost” letting in the suggestion of otherness, of other realities, self-determined, subjective realities, self-determining, subject-women, grating against the uniqueness, the exclusiveness of objective, authoritative Islam.

For although Djébar overtly challenges a “closed” view of Islam, her acceptance of the Prophet as a figure of authority shows an adherence to a certain objective truth, conflicting with her celebration of plurality, of otherness, of women who have their own different versions of the truth, implying an understanding of truth as subjective. This conflict symbolises the meeting and clash of mutually exclusive ideologies,

³⁷ “Mary, Mary, once contrary”, *The Independent on Sunday*, (24 August 1997), p. 18.

³⁸ Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics*, p. 167.

³⁹ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 39.

Islam and feminism, both of which have “interpellated” the author, neither of which she can wholly accept or reject.

However some kind of resolution can be found in the form of a “politically correct Islam”, its ideological fusion, if not its content, modelled along the lines of Christian feminism:

What does it mean to these women to be called “Christian” feminists? Certainly it does not suggest anything distinctive or unique about Jesus Christ. Being Christian [for these Christian feminists] involves being religiously open; open to all other cultural and religious traditions where freedom for women is being sought, and open above all to the possibility that Christianity might be wrong. It means being prepared to allow experience to sift through the traditions in which we have previously seen ourselves and to work out a new hermeneutic which will make sense of this. In some cases it means being prepared to embrace a new paganism which will begin to incorporate the old female earth religions with a new non-patriarchal Christianity.⁴⁰

Djebar too allows her feminist consciousness to sift through Islam in order “to work out a new ‘hermeneutic’ which will make sense of this”. *Loin de Médine* too is “open to all other cultural and religious traditions”, not, as in the case of Christian feminists, embracing a *new* paganism alongside a new non-patriarchal Christianity, but incorporating the *old* paganism of pre-Islamic Arabia with a new non-hierarchical Islam. For it is not only the special presence of the Prophet but also that of the non-Muslim heroines, “les insoumises”, which radiates out from the pages of *Loin de Médine*, revealing his “éclat” as *not completely unique*, but rather as *shared* with these “others” who challenge both his pre-eminence and his monopoly on the Truth.

Djebar’s openness to these “other” heroines is such that she celebrates their intelligence, courage and wit, even when these qualities are pitted against the might and mores of Islam, even when their “éclat” rivals that of the Prophet. The Prophet shares his “éclat” with “la chanteuse des satires”, the renowned poetess. This powerful woman uses her word as a subversive weapon against her enemies, foremost of which is Mohammed himself:

⁴⁰ Elaine Storkey, *Contributions to Christian Feminism* (London: Christian Impact, 1995), p. 13.

Avant le départ des chefs des Beni Kinda à Médine et donc avant leur islamisation, la poétesse avait été l'auteur de nombreuses diatribes poétiques contre Mohammed en personne C'est cet *éclat* même, c'est cette gloire acquise tôt dans la guerre verbale, qui dut ensuite retenir la chanteuse. Elle ne vint pas, c'est certain, à Médine; elle ne se trouva pas en présence de celui qui avait fait objet de sa verve acérée. Par fidélité à son art - une forme d'amour propre -, elle dut croire que ce serait se renier que de devenir musulmane. (p. 132) [My emphasis]

Despite the fact that the poetess's distrust of religion is linked to its potential for stifling self-expression, this indirect indictment of Islam is counteracted by the suggestion that the poetess's fear of being muzzled is unfounded, and by the statement that art itself is nothing more than an expression of pride. Djébar thus celebrates the poetess's energy and art as a powerful life-force, while at the same time denouncing her spark of poetic genius as a dangerous expression of rebellion, "sa poésie-danger", and as a form of blind arrogance: "Tant que sa flamme la nourrissait, tant que son rôle polémique la paraît aux yeux des siens d'une valeur rare, plus rare que la beauté, plus recherchée que l'attrait féminin ordinaire, elle n'éprouvait nul besoin de croire en Dieu. Quel Dieu? N'avait-elle pas en elle une étincelle divine?" (p. 132).

There is admiration for this "High Priestess of Poetry", but also a suggestion that her poetry is blasphemous and her religion false, its promise of immortality an illusion. The treatment the poetess receives at the hands of the Islamic military leader, Mohadjir ibn Ommayya, is horrific - her teeth are pulled out, her hands cut off. Her body, but not her soul, is cruelly crushed into submission: "- Je les maudirai avec mes mains, mes mains coupées!... Mon chant leur restera insaisissable, tel l'épervier qu'ils n'atteignent pas!" (p. 136). Yet Djébar stresses that this barbaric act was condemned by the official representative of Islam, Abou Bekr ("Abou Bekr, mis au courant du châiment subi par la poétesse, écrit une lettre de réprimandes véhémentes à Mohadjir..." p. 136), and that, as such, can be seen to be a betrayal of the true spirit of Islam. So both the role of Islam as the perpetrator of evil, and the role of the poetess as the heroine are qualified. Islam is not the true "villain", neither is the poetess the perfect heroine.

“Kérama la Chrétienne” also has a radiating presence: “On me disait belle dans ma jeunesse, certains le répètent encore comme s’ils avaient vu mon visage d’alors, alors qu’ils voyaient, j’en suis sûre, *l’éclat*, sur ma face, de mon espérance d’hier, de mon espérance d’aujourd’hui” (p. 141) [My emphasis]. Kérama is an octogenarian nun whose legendary beauty convinces a simple Bedouin, attached to General Khalid’s army, that she should be taken as a slave. Kérama’s people rise to her defence, but because their position is precarious, and the whole situation so ridiculous, she offers to confront the old Bedouin herself rather than risk her people engaging in a doomed battle.

Again the official Islamic representative present in the story, General Khalid, is seen to distance himself from, and to be embarrassed by the whole episode: “tout en lui semblait regretter cette intervention” (p. 144). He shows respect to her and to her people: “Retourne chez les tiens! Mon respect, notre respect pour toi et pour tous ceux du Livre t’accompagne. Que Dieu te garde!” (p. 146).

As Khalid and Abou Bekr act as the representatives of the true spirit of Islam, a spirit which is open to the other, and which condemns the abuse of power, their messages reinforce the ideological agendas of the work. *Loin de Médine* presents an Islam which is open to the other, echoing the theology of Christian feminists. The novel also presents the true, non-hierarchical spirit of Islam as the Islam represented by the Prophet, and those closest to him. This second agenda is more in line with the thinking of evangelical “feminist” theology which seeks not to open up Christianity to the outside, but to expose an open or egalitarian spirit on the *inside*. But whereas not only Djébar, but also many *liberal* Christian feminists, regard Mary, “la femme-mère” as unworthy of standing as a figure of liberation, ironically it is she who is cited by *evangelical* theologians as revealing an egalitarian spirit at the heart of Christianity, because of the focal point she occupies in biblical history: “It is a woman, rather than a man whom God chooses as the human vehicle which travels between the old and new covenants.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Ibid. , p. 55.

The idea that *Loin de Médine* can be read as an apologia for the lost spirit of Islam is reinforced by an incident related about Omar ibn el Khattab, the second caliph, who recounts one of his last conversations with the Prophet, where they lament the passing of the golden age of Islam. The Prophet, finding Omar in tears, asks him why he is distressed:

“Ce qui me fait pleurer, c’est que, jusqu’à présent, nous étions dans un accroissement constant dans notre religion, mais si, à présent, elle est achevée, il faut dire qu’il n’y a pas de choses qui atteignent leur plénitude sans que, par la suite, elles ne s’amointrissent!” Et le Prophète, m’ayant écouté, a répondu après un long moment: “Certes, Omar, tu dis vrai!”(p. 167)

The true spirit of Islam is rehabilitated not only as liberal, in the sense of being open, but also as liberating. “Islam, le contraire de la contrainte” are the words voiced by Oum Keltoum, and echoed repeatedly in the novel, as Djébar weaves into the text stories which challenge the traditional religious arguments used to justify “Islamic constraints” (such as the widespread imposition of veiling), and repressive measures taken against the freedom of artistic expression.⁴²

“L’Islam c’est le contraire de la contrainte!” (p. 193). In Oum Keltoum’s case it is her revulsion against her second husband which provokes her to utter these words, in her determination to be released from her marriage: “- Je suis musulmane! Si je désire encore partir, c’est parce que je n’accepte pas Zubeir comme époux! L’Islam, c’est le contraire de la contrainte! se reconforta-t-elle peu à peu” (p. 193). The hierarchy within their marriage is symbolically reversed, not by Islamic law which upholds this hierarchy, but by the Prophet, the author of Islam, who when confronted by Zubeir’s complaints about Oum Keltoum, upholds *the woman’s* position in the spirit of egalitarian Islam and admonishes *the man* (alluding to a *sura* inspired by Oum Keltoum): “-Tu ne peux pas parler ainsi de cette femme, ô Zubeir. N’oublie pas que, pour cette Croyante, Dieu lui-même est intervenu!’ ... Tête baissée, le coeur humilié, il salua et quitta la pièce” (p. 197).

The strong impulse towards freedom leads Djébar not only to look for it both outside and inside Islam, but also to extend it to the concept of faith itself. The freedom to

question or doubt makes it possible for all the daughters of Islam, as it does for Oum Hakim, to come full circle and to freely choose the way of Islam. Like Djébar, Oum Hakim is simultaneously placed both at the heart and on the boundaries of faith. By selecting a woman of impeccable Islamic credentials as the subject of doubt (Oum Hakim's second marriage is to Omar ibn el Khattab, the second caliph), Djébar is presenting it as an acceptable facet of faith, rather than as a betrayal of the truth:

Oum Hakim se savait musulmane d'emprunt, en quelque sorte. Non pas honteuse, non pas hypocrite, simplement "musulmane" ("soumise", comme ils spécifiaient parfois) parce que ainsi elle avait gardé, envers et contre tous, son époux... Elle ne priait pas. (p. 160)

Djébar highlights ways in which Oum Hakim is a reluctant convert to Islam (she converts in order to save her husband, retains an attachment to the pagan statues of her childhood and refuses to pray), but also shows how this "hésitation intérieure" is overcome, as Oum Hakim, inspired by her vision of the Prophet, goes on to distinguish herself on the Islamic battlefield and to gain religious prominence through her marriage to the caliph (p. 170-72).

Historical methodology

On an ideological level, Djébar allows feminist consciousness to open her religion to the outside. At the same time she refuses to allow it to shine a torch on the problematic areas on the inside, revealing a profound ambiguity towards feminist ideology. But how far is Djébar's feminist consciousness in tune with another area of feminist scholarship – that of historical methodology? Reverting to Dinesen's tale, we note that Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn see in the "Blank Page" a demonstration of the concerns of feminist historians:

The nuns are entrusted with keeping the records, with preserving the histories of the royal women as recorded on their marriage sheets and then framed and displayed for the edification of future generations. In this respect they function like traditional historians whose focus has been the history of

⁴² See the discussions on veiling, pp. 156-57, and on entertainment at a wedding, pp. 138-40.

dynasties and who, if they have attended women at all, considered them within a domestic sphere and in relation to the ruling families.⁴³

But Greene and Kahn point out that the nuns' records also tell a different story. For although the frames they display suggest the traditional way women have been contained in history, the blank page "implies other possibilities" suggesting a subtext which is subversive to the main text: "These two taken together represent the traditional paradigm and alternatives to it which are the dual concerns of feminist historians and literary critics."⁴⁴ They proceed to describe the elements of traditional historical scholarship, against which feminist historical scholarship should militate, as follows:

- The periodisation of history based on the concept of male achievement,
- The focus on hierarchical power-dynamics, exemplified in the prevalence of the "history of dynasties",
- The traditional opposition between exclusively male and exclusively female history⁴⁵

How far does *Loin de Médine* avoid the traditional historical mould? Superficially, the novel's structure appears to mimic the periodisation of history based on the concept of male achievement. The prologue is centred on the Prophet in his dying moments at a time when the whole of Arabia was unified under the religion of Islam and its messenger. The book is then divided into two chronologically successive parts relating to the Caliphates of the Prophet's two successors, Abou Bekr (10^e-13^e année de l'hégire), and Omar ibn el Khattab (13^e-23^e année de l'hégire).

The contents of the prologue, however, and the internal sections within the two main parts, undermine the "male" framework. The Prophet's dying moments show him not only as a figure of authority, as the divine messenger, but as a vulnerable figure in all his humanity. The opening scene also underlines one of the central tenets of *Loin de Médine*, which is that the Prophet was surrounded by, loved by, and dependent on women. Similarly, although the work is divided into two parts, based

⁴³ Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman", p. 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid., see section III, pp. 12-21.

on two successive Caliphates, all the chapters they contain bear the title of a female subject who questions male authority. The main challenge to traditional periodisation, is not, however, related to a concept of history based on *male* achievement, but to a concept of history limited to that of *Islamic* achievement. The swift movement between pre-Islamic and Islamic heroines, a movement which implies a common voice, a cry of sisterhood, defies the Islamic historian's tendency to cut off the pre-Islamic age, and to view the birth of Islam as the starting-point of history.

Nevertheless, Djébar, like Dinesen's nuns, appears to repeat the traditional paradigm, as she acts as the guardian not of the history of a royal dynasty but of the history of a religious dynasty, the Prophet's family. Although *Loin de Médine* provides an insight into the lives of both ordinary and extraordinary women, the text does (in contrast to *L'Amour, la fantasia*) privilege the "Greats" of history, the extraordinary women of the past, whether "soumises" or "insoumises". However, the political agenda which is the driving-force behind the novel constrains Djébar to concentrate on "famous names" (and where the work does occasionally include "ordinary" people, their inclusion is subordinated to an ideological agenda which seeks to present Islam as an open religion⁴⁶). Djébar does, however, use her extraordinary heroines to show how women of this transitional age functioned outside the "domestic sphere", and as such challenges the traditional conception of women, and, especially Muslim women, as being excluded from the public world.

Not only do feminist historians reject the privileging of the "Greats" of history, but they also denounce the privileging of female history over male history. As with feminist literary scholarship, feminist historical scholarship has come to reject the substitution of woman's history (as opposed to women's literature) for mainstream history (as opposed to the canon) as reduplicating the central assumption - woman as the "other", separate and apart. As with early feminist literary criticism which sought to *compensate* for the neglect of female writers by creating a female canon, early feminist historians also concerned themselves with *compensatory history*

charting the lives of exceptional women and paying particular attention to women's contributions .

The trends of feminist literary criticism and feminist historical scholarship can be seen to mimic developments in feminist politics, which, according to Kristeva, progressed from this compensatory phase (as women demanded equal rights and strove to be accepted into the symbolic order) through a radical exclusive phase, where femininity is celebrated, towards a more inclusive relationship to the world of men.⁴⁷ Although the compensatory stage has been criticised for appending women to the symbolic order (or to history or to literature) as it has already been defined (while leaving the existing paradigm unchallenged), it can nevertheless be viewed as the valuable and necessary precursor to the more inclusive philosophy which succeeded it.

The compensatory stage to which *Loin de Médine* could itself be "appended" must be viewed in the same way as the compensatory phrase of the early western feminist movement, namely as a necessary first step in the long road towards the possibility of a more inclusive perspective. Against the background of the Algeria of today, compared to that of the 1960s when the Anglo-American feminists were coming up with their compensatory histories, it is no mean feat for Djébar to ask "them", *les intégristes*, through the pages of *Loin de Médine*, however indirectly, not to be let into the symbolic order, the Nom-du-Père, but into the religion of the idealised Father, the order of Islam.

⁴⁶ Examples of "ordinary people" include Habiba, the errant woman who demonstrates Islam's acceptance of the marginalised, and Djamila, who demonstrates Islam's encouragement of the Arts (Habiba is the only entirely fictional main character in the work, see Djébar's comment p.350).

⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva's analysis of the three stages in the development of the woman's movement is elaborated in "Women's time", trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* (1981), 7, 1, pp. 23-35, pp. 33-34. Discussed in Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics*, pp. 12-13.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show the way in which Djébar's works are in constant dialogue with a variety of feminisms, highlighting the specific areas where this dialogue takes on a particular intensity, namely in the area of linguistic style, in the relation between woman and language, in the analysis of relations between women, and in the treatment of women in Islamic history.

Whereas elements of a writing style reminiscent of *écriture féminine* can be pinpointed throughout Djébar's work, demonstrated in outbursts of highly rhythmic language, in her privileging of voice, in her desire to incorporate "other experience", in the use of repetition and accumulation, and in the occasional fragmentation evident in her texts, the highly structured, consciously constructed "architectural" form of her novels evades the fluidity and openness to the processes of the unconscious which lie at the heart of Cixous's idea of feminine writing.

On the other hand, Kristeva's theory of language as a process, as interaction between semiotic and symbolic provides a means of doing justice to the variety and mobility of the linguistic styles expertly manipulated by Djébar, in which the constant and dynamic balance between the semiotic and symbolic is played out within a wide spectrum of possibilities, with the balance between the two modalities shifting constantly. Paralleling the generic instability of the particular novel selected for its linguistic qualities (*L'Amour, la fantasia*), Djébar's language passes back and forth almost effortlessly from the defined boundaries of the historical symbolic, to the sensuous, limitless world of the semiotic, its dynamism marking her out as a writer of Kristevan credentials. But whether grounded in historical reality or in sensuous lyricism, Djébar uses language as a weapon which fiercely resists the colonial and patriarchal attempts to repress woman, whether figured as *l'Algérie-femme* or as *femmes d'Algérie*.

Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine* does nevertheless provide a key to Djébar's attitude to the relation between woman and language, if not to Djébar's stylistic disposition. For both Cixous and Djébar react against the sexual violence of patriarchal language and look for a language which woman can call her own.

Despite the fundamental difference in their response to the problem of language, Djébar's *écriture des femmes*, as explored in *Vaste est la prison*, and Cixous's *écriture féminine* exhibit a surprising amount of features in common, sharing a common starting-point of exclusion, a common engagement with the locus of the repressed, a common maternal source, and a common desire for resistance. But whereas Cixous's search leads to the possibility of a new freedom and transformation, Djébar's historical quest brings no such satisfaction. It is only by embracing a matrilineal writing, which rejoins Cixous in its desire to give voice to the other, that Djébar finds she can find the way to express the Maternal Voice silenced by patriarchal language.

Although the threat of male violence (whether colonial, political or domestic) threatens to overwhelm her texts, Djébar succeeds in subverting masculine power by either gradually phasing out masculine images from her text (as in *L'Amour, la fantasia*, which takes a sharp turn in the final stages towards the world of women) or by almost completely by-passing them (as in *Ombre sultane*). Here the only male character, who remains the anonymous "homme" throughout, is completely undeveloped, and gradually becomes irrelevant, as the two women take central stage.

The relation between Hajila and Isma provides the prototype for Djébar's images of sisterhood, which come surprisingly close to Irigaray's images of a female sociality - both being predicated on mutual reciprocity, both coming into being as a result of distance or difference, both being played out in silence, and both foregrounding a sense of wonder at the elusiveness of the other's subjectivity. Nevertheless, while Irigaray's later work comes to grips with the possibility of the coming into being of a relation between men *and* women, this consideration is largely absent in the works of Djébar studied in this thesis, which concern themselves almost exclusively with the experience of women, and in the case of *Ombre sultane*, with restoring relations *between* women as a form of resistance to male power.

This "feminine exclusiveness" is also the hallmark of Djébar's treatment of Islam, in its primary focus on the experiences of women. While confirming her commitment to portraying positive images of women in Islam, her emphasis on woman's experience in *Loin de Médine*, eschews current trends in feminist historical

scholarship which tend to demonstrate a more inclusive attitude towards *male* history. On the other hand, her approach to Islam conforms to the spirit of Christian feminist scholarship, which, like Djébar's work, also attempts to present a non-patriarchal religion. Ahmed's work, however, demonstrates the extent to which Djébar's desire to invent a "politically-correct" Islam compels her to repress those pragmatic practices of Islam which reinforce its patriarchal/hierarchical bent, while foregrounding what she undeniably demonstrates to be the egalitarian spirit of Islam. Nevertheless, this exploration of the women at the dawn of Islam remains a powerful and courageous work of resistance to the trends of current fundamentalism.

What Djébar calls her "own kind of feminism"¹ is a feminism of exposure and resistance. As we have seen, many of her resistance strategies conform to those employed by the French feminists, whether she transgresses symbolic language with her semiotic rhythms, resists the Law of the Father by giving voice to the other/Mother, refuses the notion of woman as man's other, or revisits maternal geneologies.

But whereas it is possible to identify Djébar's resistance to "an unsatisfactory present"² – and past, visions of a better future are notably absent from her work. This stands in marked contrasts to the projects of Cixous and Irigaray in particular, whose blueprints for the future imply at least the possibility of the transformation of patriarchal codes, and therefore an underlying optimism. Djébar's novels, while demonstrating fierce resistance to patriarchal power-relations, are nevertheless increasingly overshadowed by the reality of the effect on these patriarchal power-relations on women in present-day Algeria.

As Algeria retreats into a Dark Age of fundamentalism and political intrigue and violence, the optimism of the early independence years, is all but extinguished by the ever-worsening status and conditions of Algerian women. Nevertheless while the

¹ Clarisse Zimra, "Woman's Memory Spans Centuries: An interview with Assia Djébar", Afterword to *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992). p. 175.

² Reference to previously cited quotation: "In all forms of feminism there is a tension between the critique of an unsatisfactory present and the requirement, experienced as psychological or political, for some blueprint, however sketchy, of the future". Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, p. 18.

will to resist and a certain fatalism hang in a precarious balance, it is the former which ultimately dominates in Djébar's oeuvre. Djébar herself identifies her writing as protest, quoting Mario Vargas Llosa "In the heart of all fiction the flame of protest burns brightly".³ At the same time she questions the effectiveness of writing in the face of extreme political circumstances, while expressing the hope that "my books can prolong the echo of the voices of so many other women..." Despite her own doubts, it comes as no surprise that a woman who writes with such "unflinching honesty and stately perseverance"⁴ has been dubbed potentially "the most threatening person to Algeria's political chieftains, secular and religious."⁵

The final protest, not expressed by Assia Djébar but *on behalf* of her contribution to international literature will be left to William Glass, who, in his encomium for Assia Djébar's 1996 Neustadt Prize, decried the label of "Women's Literature" attached to Djébar's work as profoundly disturbing, arguing that such labels, while being intrinsically reductive, are in the case of Djébar's work, a particular insult to the importance of her subject, her moral integrity, and perhaps most significantly, to her ability to write both beautifully and disturbingly: "Assia Djébar is not being celebrated here because she has brought us more bad news, or exotic treats, or even her eloquent imagination, worthy as much as that may be; we are lauding her here because she has given weeping its words and longing its lyrics."⁶

³ Assia Djébar, Neustadt Prize Acceptance Speech, *World Literature Today*, Autumn 1996, pp. 783-84, p. 784.

⁴ Djelal Kadir, "Of Pencil Points and Petty Tyrants", *World Literature Today*, Autumn 1996, p. 777.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 777.

⁶ William Glass, "Encomium for Assia Djébar, 1996 Neustadt Prize Laureate, *World Literature Today*, Autumn 1996, p. 782.

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Appendix A: Published Papers

Letters with Publishers' Permissions

Copies of published papers

1. "Kristeva meets *L'Amour, la fantasia*", *Journal for Francophone Studies*, 1:2 (1998), pp. 101-13.
2. "*Loin de Médine* – Islamic vision or feminist revision". In Kamal Salhi (ed.), *Francophone Voices*. Exeter: Elm Bank Publications, 1999, pp. 86-104.



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From Dr Kamal Salhi

re: Copyright

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Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to confirm that I hold the copyright to the publication "Francophone Voices" and that a photocopy of the following article from that book, by Priscilla Ringrose may be included as an appendix to her PhD thesis:

Priscilla Ringrose, " 'Loin de Médine' - Islamic vision or feminist revision", in Kamal Salhi (ed.) *Francophone Voices* (Exeter: Elm Bank Publications, 1999), pp. 86-104.

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The Faculty of Arts Office
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Dear Sir/Madam

As the publisher of the International Journal of Francophone Studies, I am writing to confirm my permission for Priscilla Ringrose to include a photocopy of the following Journal article as an appendix in her PhD thesis to be submitted at the University of Edinburgh, on the basis that it is fully referenced in the usual way and our permission is acknowledged:

"Kristeva meets *L'Amour, la fantasia*" in *Journal of Francophone Studies*, Volume 1, Number 2, Intellect (1998), pp. 101-13.

Yours sincerely

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Kristeva meets *L'amour, la fantasia*

Priscilla Ringrose

1. Kristeva - identity, language and politics

Julia Kristeva analyses language as a process constituted in the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic modalities. The correlation between the two modalities determines the type of language (theoretical, scientific narrative, poetic etc.). Kristeva advocates *une écriture* which aspires to "the impossible dialectic of the two terms" and asks whether anyone is "capable of this risky balance of extremes?". She suggests an answer "Perhaps a woman?" (Kristeva 1974a, p. 44). This article proposes another "Perhaps Djebbar?"

Kristeva's concept of the development of feminist politics in three distinct phases will serve as a model against which *L'amour, la fantasia* will be examined. Before looking at this model, the article will examine Kristeva's theory of identity which informs both her concept of psycholinguistics and her politics. The main concepts associated with Kristeva's concept of identity are the semiotic, the thetic and the symbolic.

"The semiotic refers to the first, pre-verbal but already social ordering of reality during the earliest pre-Oedipal stage of infancy." (Morris 1993, p.198). At this stage the child has no separate identity from its mother, and experiences life as part of a continuum with the maternal body. This semiotic existence is characterised by the "rhythms of heartbeat and pulse, dark and light, hot and cold, the regular intaking and outgiving of breath and food and faeces." (Kristeva, cited in Morris, p.198). It is in the gradual ordering of this endless flow of pulsations, which are gathered into the semiotic *chora*, that Kristeva sees as the emergence of the basis of signification: "At that point, breast, light, and sound become a *there*: a place, a spot, a marker." (p. 144).

The traces of semiotic pulsations resurface in adult language in the form of irregular rhythms. In adult discourse "the semiotic functions as a rhythm, prosody, word-games, the non-sense of sense, laughter" (Kristeva, cited in Turkle, p.82). The semiotic, characterised by flow, fluidity, rhythm and movement, although providing the basis of meaning, is distinguished from signification which is characterised by definition, unity, and fixed positions. If signification and indeed identity are to be produced, then the semiotic continuum, the state of child/mother indifferentiation must be split - a split which Kristeva terms "*le thélique*".

The thetic phase enables the subject to attribute differences, and therefore signification, to what was previously the ceaseless heterogeneity of the semiotic *chora*. This phase marks the threshold between the semiotic and the symbolic. In this threshold position the "thetic" functions a powerful controlling mechanism. Without the impetus of "thetic control", the semiotic has the potential to dominate language with "the force of its unconscious drives, transforming it into psychotic utterance" (Morris 1993, p.145).

Kristeva (like Lacan) posits the mirror phase as the first step in the

detachment from the *chora*, and the Oedipal phase as the moment at which the thetic rupture (separation from the mother) is achieved. Once thetic detachment has occurred, the subject enters into the symbolic order (the world ordered by patriarchy or the Law of the Father), where “the [semiotic]*chora* [is] more or less successfully repressed, and can be perceived only as pulsational *pressure* on symbolic language: as contradictions, meaninglessness disruption, silences and absences in the symbolic language.” (Moi 1985, p.162). It is this pulsational semiotic pressure on symbolic language which Kristeva associates with “le langage poétique”.

Language is thus a dialectic between the semiotic and symbolic modalities. Discourse is produced as a process dependent on the interrelation of the two modalities, rather than as a static order of meaning: “Ces deux modalités sont inséparables dans le *procès de la significance* qui constitue le langage, et la dialectique de l’une et de l’autre définit les types de discours (narration, métalangue, théorie, poésie, etc.): c’est dire que le langage dit ‘naturel’ tolère différents modes d’articulation du sémiotique et du symbolique.” (Kristeva 1974b, p.22).

Language that tends towards the symbolic *paternal* modality of language is “extrovert” or “objective” in the sense that it is being directed towards the object world of other people and things (Morris 1993, p.144). It aims at making itself understood, at enabling social interaction to take place, and its disposition is therefore towards fixed and unitary definition. The origins of the semiotic modality on the other hand “lie in the non-gendered libidinal drives of the pre-Oedipal phase” so that its disposition is towards meaning as a continuum (p.145). It tends towards identification (with the maternal body) rather than separation (via the thetic) from what is other.

The symbolic *paternal* modality of language imposes the “necessary uniformity of meaning and syntactical structure to allow for social communication”, in other words to facilitate *shared meaning* while the semiotic *maternal* modality of language, characterised by rhythmic irruptions, heightening of sound patterning and disruption of syntax, is expressed as *non/sense*, manifesting itself as a “revolution” in the controlling force of the symbolic (p.145).

2. Kristeva meets *L’amour, la fantasia*

Kristeva advocates a threshold position, a balance between the two modalities, “a permanent alternation” between the semiotic and the symbolic, between control and disruption, and between the unconscious and the social – a balance which she advocates not only at the level of identity, but also in literary production, and in *political* life.

Kristeva interprets the historic development of the women’s movement as progressing in three phases. A desire for integration with the symbolic or paternal order (phase 1) is displaced by a desire for an escape into an utopian semiotic or maternal order (phase 2), only to be deferred onto the Kristevan ideal – a permanent alternation between the two extremes (phase 3).

L’amour, la fantasia appears to mimic this political model as the symbolic disposition of the historical and autobiographical texts is displaced by the semiotic disposition of the poetic texts, only to be integrated in the final part of the work where the semiotic becomes a constant presence, existing in an alternating relationship to the symbolic. This article examines how far the three identified parts of *L’amour, la fantasia* can be seen to conform to the three phases of Kristeva’s political model.

3. The symbolic mode?– the historical text

To opt out of the symbolic is, according to Kristeva, to opt out of time: “L’ordre symbolique – ordre de la communication verbale, ordre paternel de la généologie filiale – est un ordre temporel.” (Kristeva 1974b, p.39). The historical sections of *L’amour, la fantasia* are placed within the boundaries of historic time and place, in other words within *the symbolic order of life*. But to what extent do semiotic irruptions disrupt the uniformity of meaning and syntactical structure dictated by that order?

3.1 Invasion

Chapter 1 (Djebar 1992, p.18) of part 1 describes the dramatic “dawn” of colonial power, as the French navy first approaches the shores of Algiers. As “La France” comes face to face with “l’Algérie – femme”, the “Empire” does not “write back” but rather looks back. The returning gaze of “L’Algérie – femme” asks her assailant to recognise her identity and humanity, in the face of an act of territorial rape.

“Whereas the play is created before us at every performance, the film is more like a record of something that happened, or is happening, only once.” (Lodge, p.83). The opening paragraphs bring the on-coming ships into view with a strikingly visual, cinematic-like impact. A series of panoramic long takes suffused by muted colours and sounds create a sense of presence, the illusion of history in the making.

Although this historical reconstruction is placed within the symbolic boundaries of space and time, “Aube de ce 13 juin 1830” (Djebar 1992, p.18), Djebar subverts the symbolic overtones by pushing back the boundaries of thetic control and allowing desire to flood in. By transposing a historical relationship onto the plane of desire, the text demonstrates an anti-symbolic stand, reinforced on a linguistic level by sudden irruptions of the semiotic. The semiotic is present in the occasional heightening of sound patterning, in the contrast of sound and silence, in the foregrounding of lighting and colour, and in the disruption of syntax reinforcing the emotive power of the scene, which opens as follows:

Aube de ce 13 juin 1830, à l’instant précis et bref où le jour éclate au-dessus de la conque profonde. Il est cinq heures du matin. Devant l’imposante flotte qui déchire l’horizon, la Ville Imprenable se dévoile, blancheur fantomatique, à travers un poudroiement de bleus et de gris mêlés. Triangle incliné dans le lointain et qui, après le scintillement de la dernière brume nocturne, se fixe adouci, tel un corps à l’abandon, sur un tapis de verdure assombrie. (p.18)

The wide-angle opening shot reveals the oncoming armada, as Algiers, “la Ville Imprenable”, the ungraspable object of desire, comes into view. This first glimpse, viewed from the enemy angle “triangle incliné dans le lointain”, highlights the sexual tension of the scene where “le corps à l’abandon” awaits its fate. The blurred opaques and gentle pastels give the scene a sense of eerie calm. It is as if the colours detach themselves from their objects, producing an impressionist-like haze. The “blancheur fantomatique” of “la ville”, carries with it a hint of mystery but also associations of purity and innocence.

“Premier face à face” (p.18). The camera pans slowly from a long-shot of the object of desire to the desiring subject: “La ville, paysage tout[sic] dentelures et en couleurs délicates, surgit dans un rôle d’Orientale immobilisée en son mystère.” (p.18). The stillness of the scene is reinforced by the characterisation of

the object of desire as "l'Orientale immobilisée" and by the slow parading of the subject of desire, captivated by the myth of orientalism.

After the silence and suspense – the illusion of reality is suddenly broken – "Qui dès lors constitue le spectacle, de quel côté se trouve vraiment le public?" (p.18). This defamiliarising question shatters the illusion – this is not simply a visual reconstruction, but a show, a performance in which the relationship between actors and audience is called into question.

The camera zooms in on the first actor: "L'homme s'appelle Amable Matterer. Il regarde et écrit le jour même: 'J'ai été le premier à voir la ville d'Alger comme un petit triangle blanc couché sur le penchant d'une montagne.'" (p.18). In Djébar's world, where "l'amour s'écrit" the act of writing, in the absence of the act of love, is likened to the act of possession. As Djébar prefigures the active, returning gaze of the native/native land, the challenge is not just to look, to take in the scene, but to see who is looking and to follow that gaze: "Dans le désordre des hamacs suspendus en vrac, entre les pièces d'artillerie et les batteries sur le qui-vive, telles des bêtes de cirque prêtes à la cérémonie derrière un halo de projecteurs, la foule des futurs envahisseurs regarde" (p.19). The delay of the verb ascribes significance to the act of looking and prepares for the returning gaze:

Amable Matterer, capitaine en second du *Ville de Marseille*, et ses compagnons demeurent immobiles. La Ville Imprenable leur fait front *de ses multiples yeux invisibles*. (p.19) [my italics]

A dynamic is reinscribed into the relationship between "la France" and l'Alger/ie-femme", the metonym of the woman who will not be possessed, who will not be penetrated, a woman who although suffused in the myth of Orientalism silently resists that myth with her stubborn gaze: "Des milliers de spectateurs, là-bas, dénombrent sans doute les vaisseaux" (p.19). The equation "les Français/spectateurs, les Algériens/spectacle" is now reversed. The confrontation here is not only between "la France" and "l'Algérie" but between Matterer's, objective, dispassionate, detached prose and the subjective, impassioned, colourful writing by which Djébar inscribes herself into the telling of history:

A mon tour, j'écris dans sa langue, mais plus de cent cinquante ans après... En cette aurore de la double découverte, que se disent les femmes de la ville, quels rêves d'amour s'allument en elles, où s'éteignent à jamais, tandis qu'elles contemplent la flotte royale qui dessine les figures d'une chorégraphie mystérieuse?... Je rêve à cette brève trêve de tous les commencements; je m'insinue, visiteuse importune, dans le vestibule de ce proche passé, enlevant mes sandales selon le rite habituel, suspendant mon souffle pour tenter de tout réentendre... (p.20)

The outburst of poetic prose challenges Matterer's detached account. The highlighting of sound patterning in the sustained use of alliteration and assonance (the repeated vowel sounds of rêve, brève, trêve, giving way to the "v's" in "visiteuse". "vestibule", the "p's" in "proche passé", the "s's" in "sandales selon" etc.) represents an interference of semiotic language. This irruption of the semiotic symbolises Djébar's desire for unity with "l'Algérie-femme", with the lost motherland, a desire she hopes to fulfil by visiting Algeria's past and reinscribing herself into its history.

Although Djebbar places her reconstruction of the dawn of colonisation within the boundaries of symbolic/historic time, her re/vision of the event manifests an *anti-symbolic* stance, culminating in Djebbar's subjective invasion of the text. However, her reversal of the "gaze" – allowing "L'Algérie-femme" to look back into the eyes of the oppressor – is reminiscent of the *symbolic* tendency of phase 1 of Kristeva's model, as it marks a desire to be acknowledged by "La France", betraying a sense of subjectivity gained not through the self, but via the other.

4. The symbolic mode ? – the autobiographical text

In Parts 1 and 2 of *l'amour, la fantasia*, the historical sections alternate with the autobiographical ones, as Djebbar's double quest attempts to recreate a new sense of national and personal identity. The Algerian people's experience of colonial law, an external law, and their subsequent loss of national identity can be paralleled with their experience of another and very different mechanism. The law of *Oumma*, or "religious community/nationhood", dominates the personal, social and the political aspects of life in the Maghreb. This self-imposed mechanism, or internal law, causes not only the suppression of personal identity, or individuality, but by extension also results in the repression of "le moi autobiographique":

Dans la société traditionnelle [du Maghreb], l'individu n'est perçu que comme 'partie intégrante du Tout, de cette Oumma, patrie qui l'englobe et le désire au point de viser à lui faire oublier sa dimension de sujet désirant' ... Celui qui se singularise paraît oublier le "nous" et donner l'impression de se séparer du groupe, encore de la Oumma, la mère islamique; il sort de la fusion maternelle. (Déjeux 1994, p.65)

The power of the law of *Oumma* over the individual consciousness is revealed in language "Que Dieu me protège du mot "je"! s'exclame l'individu que la teneur de sa conversation oblige à faire une entorse au pluriel de rigueur pour parler de lui-même à la première personne du singulier." (p.64). Djebbar recognises this resistance to "le moi autobiographique" in herself: "J'essaie de comprendre pourquoi je résiste à cette poussée de l'autobiographie. Je résiste peut-être parce que mon éducation de femme arabe est de ne jamais *parler de soi*, en même temps aussi parce que je *parlais en langue française*." (Mortimer 1988, p.203) [my italics]

Kristeva's notion of "*le thélique*" can be applied to Djebbar's resistance to autobiography. What Djebbar refers to as the "*parler de soi*" is not only a transgression of the law of *Oumma*, but also a dangerous opening up of the self to the past, with the potential for causing semiotic disruption to the symbolic ordering of her life – a sort of thetic rupture in reverse – not going forth from infancy into the social world, but a voyage back into the past which threatens to rupture the thetic barriers holding back the semiotic spaces of her mind.

The notion of "entry into language" as representing the key to the identity of the social being is complicated by the fact that Djebbar "*parlait en langue française*". Djebbar's entry into the French language causes a split, a rupture, a thetic crisis creating in her a second and conflicting sense of self. It launches her into a new social order, an order which is also founded on rupture and repression, on the splitting of the subject into Algerian and French "selves", leading to the repression of her Algerian identity and language.

According to Murdoch, the main issues to which the text addresses itself as

“desire and the subversion of patriarchy” (Murdoch 1993, p.78). This insistence on the anti-patriarchal motive for autobiography is resisted by Djébar, in what Zimra describes as her “wry nod to French [feminist] theory, ‘my *own* kind of feminism’, an acknowledgement that is also a distancing.” (Zimra 1995, p.166). This different kind of feminism does not challenge but rather upholds the role of the father. “Donc le féminisme, chez nous, enfin l’émancipation des femmes, est passé par l’intercession des pères ... J’ai voulu évoquer cela. C’est ce qui m’amène à commencer ma propre histoire ‘main dans la main’ avec le père.” (Gauvin 1996, p.81)

This openness to dual maternal/paternal identification can be interpreted in the light of Virginia Woolf’s embracing of androgyny. Woolf sees woman as privileged, or forced, to attain an androgynous position because she is situated at once outside and inside the dominant order. The woman’s mind “can think back through its fathers or through its mothers” (Woolf 1967, p.146). In *L’amour, la fantasia* Djébar can be seen in the words of Woolf to be *thinking back through her fathers and her mothers*. In the autobiographical sections of the work, Djébar is *thinking back through her father*, tracing her establishment in the paternal/social order into which she is propelled via her entry into the paternal language.

The historical sections which describe the *entry* of “l’Algérie-femme” into the paternalistic, colonial order are paralleled by the autobiographical sections which focus on Djébar’s *entry* into the paternal order of language. In both cases, Djébar is “thinking back through her fathers” – her biological father, the Father-land (France), and the paternal language (French). But just as her look back into the history of Algeria reveals semiotic desire – in her passionate identification with the Mother-land, so Djébar’s look back into her own history via the paternal language reveals semiotic presence – as-absence – in the underlying loss of mother-identification. This “thinking back through her fathers” therefore reveals a maternal or semiotic void – a void which Djébar will consciously try to fill in part 3.

4.1 The paternal language

The site of language is the battleground between Djébar’s maternal/paternal identification. The paternal language allows her to enter the paternal order, but cuts her off from the language of the maternal, the language of love. This linguistic rupture instigates a sense of emotional loss or void. The awareness of this lack-in-language is identified with a particular incident in Djébar’s life recalled in “La Fille du Gendarme Français” (Djébar 1992, p.34–42). Here again there is a “thetic” crisis in reverse, not a rupture of semiotic harmony, but a sudden consciousness of maternal lack, of the cost of her entry into a male/symbolic language and world.

In this chapter Djébar describes the amorous relationship between Marie-Louise and her new fiancé, played out before the young Djébar and her companions. The shocking effect of the behaviour of “la fille du gendarme” is compounded by her visits to their home, where she unselfconsciously boasts of her love for Paul, referring to him as “Pilou chéri” (p.41), causing both hilarity and disapproval in her audience.

‘Pilou’, c’était Paul et le “chéri” qu’elle ajoutait devait être un vocable réservé, pensions-nous, aux alcôves et aux secrets des couples ... ‘Pilou chéri’ mots suivis de touffes de rires sarcastiques; que dire de la destruction que cette

appellation opéra en moi par la suite? Je crus ressentir d'emblée, très tôt, trop tôt, que l'amourette, que l'amour ne doivent pas, par des mots de clinquant, par une tendresse voyante de ferblanterie, donner prise au spectacle, susciter l'envie de celles qui en seront frustrées. Je décidai que l'amour résidait nécessairement ailleurs, au delà des mots et des gestes publics. (p.41/42)

This love expressed in the paternal language, is exposed as sham, a show, "une tendresse voyante de ferblanterie, un spectacle". The object of its desire is not "Pilou chéri" but the recognition of its audience – "susciter l'envie". The words "Pilou chéri" reverberate into Djebbar's adult consciousness where they mark the emotional sterility of the French language. And, because the order of language constructs identity, the emotional sterility at the level of language is projected onto a damaged sense of self:

Anodine scène d'enfance: une aridité de l'expression s'installe et la sensibilité dans sa période romantique se retrouve *aphasique*. Malgré le bouillonnement de mes rêves d'adolescence plus tard, un noeud, à cause de ce Pilou chéri, résista: la langue française pouvait m'offrir de ses trésors inépuisables, mais pas un, pas le moindre de ses mots d'amour ne me serait réservé... Un jour ou l'autre, parce que cet état *autistique* ferait chape à mes élans de femme, surviendrait à rebours quelque soudaine explosion. (p.42) [my italics]

According to Kristeva the price of father-identification is high and results in emotional/sexual ambiguity: "la fille refoule le stade oral-sadique, en même temps qu'elle refoule le vagin et la possibilité de trouver un partenaire allogène". (Kristeva 1974a, p.33). Similarly, the price of Djebbar's entry into the paternal language is high. The terms which describe it "aphasia" and "autism", also speak of deep-seated psychological trauma, of emotional loss, and withdrawal.

The rejection of the image of love associated with "Pilou chéri" is projected onto a repression of romantic love in adolescence. The words mark a process of condensation, whereby the image of the flirtatious Marie-Louise and the sound of the words imprinted on the unconscious of her mind create "un noeud", a nodal point, an intersection for a whole cluster of associated feelings, repressed memories and desire, which threaten to surface explosively.

Djebbar's adolescent identity marks an exit or exile from the language of maternal love. The loss is expressed here not at the level of semiotic language, but at the level of the loss of maternal language and of the emotional wholeness associated with maternal identification. So despite the paternal identification which the French language induces, the autobiographical text also reveals the presence of the semiotic/maternal as absence, subverting the analogy with phase1.

5. The Semiotic mode – the poetic text

The passages examined so far, from the historical/autobiographical text, demonstrate a certain resistance to the symbolic but are nevertheless based in symbolic time and place. In the poem "Sistre" (Djebbar 1992, p.129) however Djebbar abandons symbolic restraint or the "thetic control" which holds back the barriers of the semiotic, and "retreats" into semiotic or poetic language in the form of the prose poem.

5.1 Desire in poetry

"Sistre" is a poem about desire, about the fulfilment of sexual desire, and about

desire for the maternal language. The emotional "autism" associated with the paternal language can be "sensed" in Djébar's writing-in-French. As Gauvin remarks, "dans votre rapport à la langue française on sent comme une *nostalgie*, une *limite*." (Gauvin 1996, p.79) [my italics]. The nostalgia which Gauvin senses is a yearning for the Arabic language, and a nostalgia which Djébar herself explicitly associates with "Sistre". In "Sistre" we find echoes of the maternal language, in an outpouring of desire expressed in the paternal language:

Ce n'est pas par hasard si dans "L'amour, la fantasia" il y a un poème qui s'intitule "Sistre". C'est un poème sur le désir et le plaisir. Je suis contrainte de passer à la poésie parce que ce texte-là tente d'investir par les mots français, tous mes dits de femme." Et si je dis "tesson de soupirs", si je dis "circe ou ciseaux de cette tessiture", ce n'est pas pour écrire de la poésie savante. C'est parce que je tente de retrouver *de possibles vers de la poésie arabe*, où la langue fonctionne par allitérations. (p.79)

Djébar confronts her emotional autism by a dual appeal to the maternal – firstly, by exploring the semiotic possibilities of the French language, and secondly, by suffusing it with the rhythms of the maternal language. The poem is literally framed by silence "Long silence...", or "broché du silence.", and between the silences desire arises, captured in the rolling waves of rhythmic language:

La langue rythmée porte donc une représentation, une vision striée: pas l'exclusion de l'oeil par l'oreille; la représentation retentit, le son se fait image, la pulsion invocante rencontre l'objet signifiable, vraisemblablement polylogique... La langue est là pour faire éclater la musique dans le vu. (Kristeva 1977, p.194)

In "Sistre", "le son fait image"; sounds proliferate and multiply, both phonetically, by the sustained use of alliteration, and semantically, by the repeated references to a whole spectrum of sounds from "murmures", "chuchotements", to "soupirs", "rires", "plaintes", "chants" as well as to musical tone "forte" and style "staccato". "La pulsion invocante" of this "langue rythmée" recalls its "objet signifiable", the sexual coalescence of man and woman.

Long silence, nuits chevauchées, spirales dans la gorge. Râles, ruisseaux de sons précipices, sources d'échos entrecroisés, cataractes de murmures, chuchotements en taillis tressés, surgeons susurrant sous la langue, chuintements, et souque la voix courbe qui, dans la soute de sa mémoire, retrouve souffles souillés de soulerie ancienne. (l. 1-6)

"Repetition and tautology, multiplied for the sake of rhythmical wave effect is central to Kristeva's semiotic, which becomes more or less integrated into the signifier." (Pinkney, p.175). Here a rhythmical wave-effect is achieved by the sudden stream of short phrases, piling up one after the other, lashing against the shore of desire, reinforced by the seductive semiotic pleasures of alliteration. The intensity of desire is reinforced by the incessant use of alliteration and assonance, urgently and intimately linking each word to the next in a dizzy and sensual interlacing of sounds and signifiers, of "échos entrecroisés" (the "r" sound of râles, ruisseaux, interlacing with "s" of ruisseaux and précipices, the repetition of "t", "r" and "c" sounds in "entrecroisés" echoed in "cataractes", the "t" interlacing with "s" in "taillis tressés, surgeons susurrant"...); as the coalescence of man and woman is

echoed by the coalescence of signifier and signified in the onomatopoeia of "cataractes", "chuchotements", "chuintements" and "souffles".

In "Repetition in Arabic Discourse", Johnstone argues the Arabic language naturally tends towards the paradigmatic chain of language. She demonstrates that by means of the juxtaposition of paradigmatic structure in syntagmatic discourse, repetition, parallelism and paraphrase function as the main persuasive devices in Arabic discourse. "Sistre" exemplifies a loose form of cumulative syntactical parallelism characteristic of Arabic discourse.. In "Sistre", the rhythm of the first paragraph and of the following three paragraphs mimics the waves of desire, as each reaches a climax and then subsides in a long, slow ebbing. The first three paragraphs are characterised by a pile up of nominal and prepositional phrases (7 in the first, 6 in the second, 4 in the last), in each case suddenly interrupted by a break (comma), followed by a conjunction "et", and completed by a verbal phrase "et souque la voix" (l.5), "et le navire des désirs coule" (l.11), "et le corps recherche sa voix" (l.15). Whereas the parallelism at the beginning of each paragraph suggests increasing tension, the parallelism at the end of the paragraph serves to gradually slow down the pace and release the tension. The climaxing conjunction does not, as you might expect occur, sooner each time but follows an irregular pattern. The effect of repeated but irregular waves of language mimics the constant but erratic pulsations of the *chora*.

Johnstone comes to the conclusion that the Arabic language itself is inherently paradigmatic- it naturally works by pulsations, repetitions and waves rather than by rational persuasion along the logical syntagmatic chain. If this is the case, then in Kristeva's terms Arabic is an inherently more "maternal" language than French, a language more open to the semiotic, since it naturally resists the logical syntagmatic chain of language. Therefore, in terms of Djébar's writing, the Arabic language is doubly maternal - not only is it literally her mother-tongue but it is by nature more maternal than her "step-mother" tongue

Like phase 2 of Kristeva's model, Djébar's poetic text embraces the maternal wholeheartedly, indulging in semiotic escapism, in the sublimation of meaning and in the playful dance of French signifiers pointing to their Arab signs.

6. A permanent alternation? - Part 3

In the historical/autobiographical text Djébar's desire to identify with the Mother-land surfaces in the occasional irruptions of semiotic language. This yearning resurfaces as the desire for the mother-tongue, in the semiotic waves of language of her prose-poems. In part 3, however, the semiotic is neither an occasional nor an overwhelming presence but is present in a relationship of permanent alternation with the symbolic.

In this final part *semiotic* harmony with the Mother-land is achieved by experiences rooted in *symbolic* time and place - in her comm/union with the "Mothers of the Revolution". Relying on the oral testimonies of these women, Djébar now frees her historical narrative from dependence on paternalistic colonialist texts. Here again there is a creative tension between the maternal and the paternal, the semiotic and the symbolic, for the simple language of these ordinary women's his/tories is shot through by semiotic pulsations or rhythms, not by the oscillations of pre-Oedipal life but the rhythms and pulsations of the mother-tongue captured within the signifiers of the paternal language.

Djébar can be seen in Lacanian terms as a "dual subject", her identity

having been constructed by her entry into the maternal language and then reconstructed by her second entry into the paternal language. In parts 1 and 2, Djébar “thinks back through her fathers”, concentrating on the effects not only of her entry into the paternal language/world, but on the Father-land’s “entry” into the Mother-land. Yet parts 1 and 2 also reveal a maternal void – the Motherland stripped of her identity and the adolescent alienated from the mother figures of her childhood.

In part 3 Djébar frees herself from the paternal filter and attempts to fill this maternal void by consciously “thinking back through her mothers”, by revisiting the world of women (the mother-figures of past and present), and by reinvesting her language with the rhythms of the mother-tongue. “Si l’amour s’écrit”, if desire is revealed in and by language, then part 3 represents Djébar’s desire-in-writing, her desire to satisfy the ultimate lack, to recapture the lost semiotic bond, severed in infancy and all but destroyed by her entry into the paternal language.

6.1 Voix

In the “Voix” chapters, “les femmes d’Algérie” who took part in the War of Independence tell their story in the first person. Here the semiotic is present on a linguistic level, in the traces of the maternal language perceptible in the signs of the paternal language. In these “voix” sections, Djébar again “thinks back through her mothers”. She is thinking back through the “Mothers of the Revolution” and is writing back through her mother-tongue, incorporating their oral testimonies in the text “par une traduction voulue au premier degré” (Mortimer 1988, p.201).

Chantal Zabus has addressed the problems of reproducing African speech within a European text, defining the process as “the relexification” of one’s mother tongue using English vocabulary but indigenous structures and rhythms.” (p.314). Zabus also draws a distinction between interpretative translation and relexification:

Unlike interpretative translation or the ‘lesser’ activity of *transcodage* which both take place *between two texts* – the original and the translated version – relexification is characterised by *the absence of an original*. It therefore does not operate from the language of one text to the other but from one language to the other within the same text. Such texts are ... palimpsests for, behind the scriptural authority of the target European language, the earlier, imperfectly erased remnants of the source language are still visible. (Zabus 1994, p.317).

Djébar’s “Voix” are a combination of transcodage and relexification – transcodage does take place between two “message events” – her original recorded interviews conducted in Arabic with the “Mothers of the revolution”, and her “scriptural” French version of these interviews – but they are nevertheless also palimpsests, as Djébar consciously “operates from one language to the other within the same text”, using the techniques of relexification to “render visible the source language”. In the “voix” sections, this technique allows not only the recovery of a repressed identity but, as Zabus suggests, to the recovery of a repressed language: “The linguistic remnants inhabiting the relexified text may lead to the discovery of the repressed source language.” (p.317).

The section entitled “Voix” (Djébar 1992, p.137) is the story of Chérifa and begins when she is only thirteen years old. She tells of her experience at the

hands of the French soldiers who burnt down her home three times. Her resistance to them precipitates her removal to the plains. She escapes then witnesses her brother's Ahmed's death as he falls to the ground, shot by a bullet. She escapes only to return to the scene later, where she finds her other brother, Abdelkader.

In order to suffuse her "voices" with the sounds and signs of the maternal language, Djébar makes considerable use of transliteration, as well as the direct translation of Arabic expressions: "La France arriva jusqu'à nous, nous habitons à la zaouia Sidi M'hammed Aberkane." Here Chérifa says "France", meaning the French army. Djébar also reproduces Arabic syntax, in sentences such as "Toi, avec l'une de tes soeurs, reviens..." (p.139)

The most significant way in which the text mimics the repressed source language is, however, by the use of repetition. Repetition not only slows down the text but also emphasises its lack of linearity. Its use as a persuasive device is characteristic of Arabic discourse. The lack of logical or syntagmatic succession is emphasised by the lack of co-ordinating conjunctions, as sentences are juxtaposed rather than linked: "Alors les Frères sont venus, le soir même. Ils nous conduisirent plus haut, vers Sidi Bou Amrane. Nous parvînmes dans le douar, avant l'aube. Les maquisards nous cherchaient un logis et nous tous, nous les suivions: les femmes, mon vieux père, mes petits frères." (p.137).

The use of repetition reinforces the impact of Chérifa's story. The repetition of the verb "brûler" (which occurs seven times in the first seven paragraphs) combined with syntactical parallelism - "La France est venue et elle nous a brûlés." and again "De nouveau les soldats revinrent; de nouveau ils nous brûlèrent" - "La zaouia a brûlé; notre douar aussi va brûler!" - mimics the rhythm of the mother-tongue, and serves to foreground the persistent cruelty of the French army (p.137).

Chérifa's brother's death is described in very simple yet moving language. Paraphrase is used to convey the force of Chérifa's pain on witnessing the shooting: "Il courait devant moi quand il est tombé: une balle l'atteignit à l'oreille. Il est tombé devant moi... Il est tombé sur la face et, dans sa chute, il a même renversé un garçon qui s'est blessé sur la pierre. Mais le garçon s'est relevé." (p.140). The first sentence provides the basic fact of the incident. In sentences 2 and 3 this fact is restated more concisely, and then more graphically. According to Johnstone, one of the most important ways that *presence* is created in Arabic is through repetition, and paraphrastic repetition in particular. Djébar's use of a slow style and repetitive rhythms allow the traces of the maternal language to affect the signifiers of the paternal language, which in turn resist the syntagmatic chain of language.

Because of this resistance to logical or syntagmatic succession, the voice section appear to have no construction, just as the pulsating oscillations of the *chora* appear to have no controlling force, no unity or identity. But, just as the rhythmic space of the *chora* is nevertheless subjected to a "regulating process", so the rhythmic space of the text which appears "unconstructed", is nevertheless subject to a regulating process, which creates *presence* through the effect of accumulated repetition. The result is not a well-constructed argument against colonisation but the eloquent rhetoric of "la voix qui chavire", quietly but convincingly condemning her oppressors. Here again we have the balance of the two modalities - as the semiotic, in the sense of the maternal language, exerts a constant pressure on its paternal counterpart.

6.2 Corps enlacés

In "Corps enlacés", Djébar uncovers the faces behind the "voix" sections, as she recounts her actual meetings with Chérifa and Lla Zohra, whom she visits in their mountain homes. Lla Zohra the cousin of Djébar's grand-mother, is now in her eighties; Chérifa is married to "un veuf taciturne". As Djébar thinks back through the mothers of the revolution, the pressure of the *semiotic* in the *symbolic* of language (in "Voix"), becomes the presence of the *mother-figures* in the *symbolic* present of history.

"Corps enlacés" represents the counterpoint to Djébar's "aphasie amoureuse", the mutual embrace of women united by the bonds of sisterly love. The encounter with these women is energised by a sense of Djébar's own presence and charged by a sense of emotional openness. It is as if Djébar's sense of self, which is often masked by anguish or confusion in this "préparation à l'autobiographie", is finally liberated as she gives herself and her emotions freely to her "sisters". Her unbridled affection for her "petite soeur" and "petite mère" is revealed both by word and by gesture: "Nous nous embrassons, nous nous touchons, nous nous admirons." (p.190). It is as if that in the intimacy of this maternal embrace she finally recaptures "le mot plein d'amour-au présent." (p.80).

But the "Corps enlacés" reveal not only the comforts but also the limits of the semiotic. For just as the state of semiotic indifferentiation must eventually be ruptured by the thetic phase, so the state of harmony with the maternal figures cannot be preserved. Djébar's ultimate separation from "les femmes d'Algérie" is the inevitable result of her writing in the paternal/symbolic language: "Mots torches qui éclairent mes compagnes, mes complices; d'elles définitivement, ils me séparent. Et sous leur poids, je m'expatrie." (p.165).

And, just as the semiotic exerts pressure on language but cannot dominate it without causing psychosis, so the maternal rhythms of Arabic, although exerting pressure on Djébar's French, cannot be fully realised in it, without causing unintelligibility. The realisation of the limits of the paternal language cause Djébar to cry out in frustration as she realises the impossibility of capturing the voice and image of Chérifa within the signs of the oppressor's language: "A peine si je frôle l'ombre de ton pas!". Language, identity and society must all submit to the rule of symbolic detachment which separates not only the mother-child continuum, but also the maternal and paternal languages, and ultimately separates Djébar from her compatriots.

However, the comfort of pre-Oedipal indifferentiation can be recovered, if only fleetingly. Djébar's meeting with Lla Zohra offers the most striking example of this, in an embrace of "corps enlacés", as Djébar relives the maternal security of childhood. "Ces nuits de Menacer, j'ai dormi dans ton lit, comme autrefois je me blottissais, enfant, contre la mère de mon père." (p.193). This meeting of Djébar and Lla Zohra represents a salutary moment of presence and harmony, a moment of belonging, of communion which transcends the alienation of her youth, a rediscovery of the accepting presence of the mother-figure, to whom she addresses her words:

Là, ta voix a poursuivi le récit. Le soleil demeurait haut. Tu t'es assise, le voile rabaisé à la taille, parmi les ajoncs et les herbes de printemps. Ton visage finement ridé mais austère - une rêverie fermant légèrement ses traits- je le photographiai parmi les coquelicots... Le soleil baissa peu à peu. Nous sommes revenues dans le silence du soir." (p.191)

This moment of harmony has a rare dream-like quality about it. Djébar captures the moment in a photograph, its image the ultimate evidence that she was, if only fleetingly, at one with herself, her land and her people.

Conclusion

Despite the symbolic/temporal mode of the historical text, the presence of the semiotic is revealed in the passionate identification with the Mother-land. Similarly, the autobiographical text, despite its paternal filter, also reveals the presence of the semiotic/maternal as absence. These irruptions of the semiotic in parts 1 and 2, and more particularly, the dynamic interplay between the semiotic and symbolic modalities in the final part of *L'amour, la fantasia*, marks Djébar out as a writer of Kristevan credentials. Djébar's work, like Kristeva's, is characterised by a realism which acknowledges both the power of the semiotic and the ultimate dominance of the symbolic, a realism which symbolically separates both writers from the triumphalist optimism of their French feminist sisters.

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Chapter 5

VOICES OF EARLY ISLAM

LOIN DE MEDINE — ISLAMIC VISION OR FEMINIST REVISION?

Priscilla M. Ringrose

‘The Blank Page’

Loin de Médine is Assia Djebar’s powerful reconstruction of pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabia, set around the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed. Its power derives from her reclaiming of this era for women, as she resurrects a forgotten and neglected past. Yet can Islam be taken out of the hands of men and be reclaimed for women? Djebar goes so far as to claim that the dawn of Islam heralds ‘[une] insupportable révolution féministe’ (p. 86). Can Islam be reconciled with this feminist perspective and be reinvented as a ‘politically-correct’ religion, palatable to both East and West? And, as a revisionist historical work, how far does *Loin de Médine* satisfy the aims of feminist historical scholarship?

In evaluating the extent to which the work meets the objectives of feminist scholarship, Djebar’s perspective on the status of woman in early Islam will be compared with that of historian Leila Ahmed and sociologist Fatima Mernissi, her re-working of Islam with the revisionist approach of Christian feminist theologians and her historical methodology with that of mainstream feminist historical scholarship.

Isak Dinesen’s short story, ‘The Blank Page’, illustrates some of the principles and contradictions inherent in the text. It is the story of Portuguese nuns who are renowned for producing the finest flax in Portugal, and who act as the privileged suppliers of linen bridal sheets to the royal household. In the convent there is a gallery, maintained by the nuns, with a series of gilt frames, each of which is ‘adorned with a coroneted plate of pure gold, on which is engraved the name of a princess’.¹ Each of these frames displays a square cut from a royal wedding sheet bearing ‘the faded markings’ of the wedding night — each frame that is except for one: ‘On this plate no name is inscribed, and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page’.²

Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn in ‘Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman’ see the contrast between the spotted bridal sheets and the ones that speak in silence as a metaphor for the two major prongs of feminist scholarship: ‘deconstructing

¹Isak Dinesen, *Last Tales* (New York: Vintage 1975), p. 103.

²Isak Dinesen, *Last Tales*, pp. 103, 104.

dominant male patterns of thought and social practice; and reconstructing female experience previously hidden and overlooked'.³

In *Loin de Médine*, Djébar reconstructs female experience in an era that has become the property of male historians writing male history from a male perspective. Her stated sources are respected historians from the eighth and ninth century AD (Ibn Hicham, Ibn Saad, Tabari) who, as Djébar puts it, are 'transmetteurs certes scrupuleux, mais naturellement portés, par habitude déjà, à occulter toute présence féminine...'⁴ By filling in the blank pages in these historians' accounts Djébar takes a stand against a male monochrome vision of the past, with the monolithic force of Islam as its starting-point, and sets into motion the discovery of 'une origine multiple, plurielle, et occultée par la réécriture phallique'.⁵ Her reconstructed pages are overshadowed by the black and white emblem of Islam but are framed by a multi-coloured, polyvalent surround, reflecting the diversity of race and religion which characterised the transitional period they cover.

The official historians' texts to which *Loin de Médine* refers betray a double bias — not only are the contributions of women overlooked, but those that are included are prone to what Montgomery Watt calls 'tendential shaping'.⁶ Watt suggests that 'tendential shaping', distorting the accounts of historical events, is a major problem in ninth-century Islamic sources. He proposes that accounts of external acts are not the most likely subject of distortion, but rather the qualities and motivations attributed to the major actors in them. In *Loin de Médine*, 'la reine yéménite', like the anonymous princess of Dinesen's story, has been denied a name in the annals of history (p. 17). Not only has her name been lost in time, but her pivotal role as an actor in history has been denied. Djébar resuscitates her queen, and gives her form: 'La reine yéménite possède sans doute un corps frêle, des bras fragiles, des mains non de guerrière, mais de poupée. Peut-être... Même si nous rêvons à d'autres formes physiques, pour la modeler là, devant nous, elle ne va pas elle-même résolument jusqu'au sang pour les autres' (p. 26).

In Djébar's reconstruction of the story, the queen, 'l'âme de la machination' initiates and perpetrates the killing of her new husband whom she despises (p. 20). Tabari's account, however, points to two alternative reasons for the plot's success, both of which deny the queen's role as major actor. It is not the queen's 'furie froide' which drives the outcome, but Aswad's drunken stupor on the night, combined with the malediction of the prophet: 'La chronique préfère insister sur l'ivresse de l'homme, sur son péché d'avoir été maudit par le Prophète en personne. Comme si les voies qu'emprunte la comploteuse si assurée n'étaient que provisoires.' (p. 20-21).

³Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn, 'Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman', in Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn (eds) *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge 1985), p. 6.

⁴Assia Djébar, *Loin de Médine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), p. 5.

⁵Clarisse Zimra, 'Comment peut-on être musulmane?: Assia Djébar repense Médine', in *notre librairie 118, Nouvelles Ecritures Féminines 2.*, Femmes d'ici et d'ailleurs, pp. 57-63, see p. 61.

⁶W. Montgomery Watt, *Mohammed at Mecca* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 13, 14.

The phenomenon of tendential shaping is not only precipitated by an entrenched *patriarchal* ideology which draws a veil over woman, it is also characterised by an entrenched *Islamic* ideology which draws a veil over the pre-Islamic age (*Jahilia*), either dismissing it as the age of ignorance, or representing it merely in terms of its ideological opposition to Islam.⁷ Djébar's eyes, in contrast, are drawn to the powerful women of the *Jahilia*, whose autonomy she upholds, not as a threat to the incoming age of Islam, but as a celebration of the untamed spirit of womanhood. As in Dinesen's story, in *Loin de Médine* there is also a gallery of fame, as Djébar reinstates her neglected heroines, both Muslim and non-Muslim, into successive frames.

In the course of the work, Djébar has recourse to fiction as she fills in the silences of what Zimra refers to as 'la réécriture phallique'.⁸ Just as Isak Dinesen's snow-white square fires our imagination (who was that princess? what happened to her?), so the blanks in the Arab historians' records inspire that of Djébar: 'Dès lors la fiction, comblant les béances de la mémoire collective, s'est révélée nécessaire pour la mise en espace que j'ai tentée là, pour rétablir la durée de ces jours que j'ai désiré habiter...' (p. 5).

As *Loin de Médine* reinvents the past, it appears to meet the criteria of feminist scholarship in its ultimate aim to give women a voice, a position from which to express their subjecthood. The main narrative sections are liberally interspersed with 'Voix' sections, voices mainly of women who are freed to tell their own stories, no longer silenced by the constricting grip of the historian's pen. The impact of the polyphony of 'voices' can be seen in counterbalance to the usage of historians' records as a reference point.⁹ The diminishing number of historical references goes hand in hand with a corresponding increase in the number of 'Voice' sections cutting through the narrative, as if the women of *Loin de Médine* are first liberated from the grasp of the historian's pen, by being given form/shape, but then undergo a more dramatic liberation, by being given a voice, an autonomous voice which no longer needs to rely on the original written word for its existence.

Woman-as-subject?

If *Loin de Médine* thus appears to succeed in the feminist project of reconstructing female experience, to what extent does it meet the second objective of feminist scholarship, that of deconstructing male patterns of thinking and social practice? Does the novel take a stand against the patriarchal understanding of woman which denies her subjectivity and her role in society? How far do Djébar's women escape the compulsive masculine force which denies her constitution as a subject, providing 'the financial

⁷*Jahilia* translates literally as 'age of ignorance'.

⁸Clarisse Zimra, 'Comment peut-on être musulmane?', in *notre librairie* 118, p. 61.

⁹The usage of historical text as a reference point, which is frequent in Section 1 (8 instances), becomes less frequent in Sections 2 and 3 (5 altogether), and then disappears in the final section. This corresponds to an increase in the number of 'Voice' sections cutting through the narrative (2 in sections 1 and 2, 3 in section 3, and 4 in section 4).

backing for every irreducible constitution as an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire.'?¹⁰

Loin de Médine was written in the aftermath of the Algerian riots of October 1988, which acted as catalyst for this act of repossession: 'Les barbus m'ont conspuée. Une femme n'avait pas le droit d'écrire sur le Prophète... C'est une œuvre de circonstance. J'ai eu besoin, devant ce sang qui coulait, de me porter témoin, de dire: 'cette religion n'appartient pas qu'à vous''.¹¹ Yet can Islam be taken out of the hands of men and reclaimed for women? Can Djébar celebrate the subjectivity of the woman not only of the pre-Islamic age, but also of early Islam, an era which is traditionally seen to encroach on her freedoms? Or are the women of early Islam in fact, as Djébar suggests, a liberated sex, who can be truly seen as the *subjects* of *Loin de Médine*? According to Lerner it is difficult to define the status of women in any given society because no single criterion can be singled out as the determining factor in her position (ie. women's role in economics, or religion, or the family, or reproduction, or sexual life etc.). Furthermore, losses in one area of life can mean, or be accompanied by, gains in another.¹² *Loin de Médine*'s agenda is to present a world in which women are in a position of power, a world which defies the traditional separation of Islamic society into public and private realms. In Lerner's terms, the 'criteria' selected here are women's role in warfare, religious life and sexuality.

Simone de Beauvoir defines the world of war as the ultimate male prerogative: 'La pire malédiction qui pèse sur la femme c'est qu'elle est exclue de ces expéditions guerrières; ce n'est pas en donnant la vie, c'est en risquant la vie que l'homme s'élève au-dessus de l'animal; c'est pourquoi dans l'humanité la supériorité est accordée non au sexe qui engendre mais à celui qui tue'.¹³

No such curse hung over the women of pre-Islamic Arabia. Both pre-Islamic women and those converted in the early years of Islam (during the Prophet's life and up until shortly after his death) participated in war not as nurse-maidens, but as battle-hungry warriors. In *Loin de Médine* Djébar breathes life into warriors such as Sajdah, a woman of Christian origin who founds a new religion, a heady cocktail of Islam and Christianity. Sajdah sets out to impose her faith and her authority, to conquer 'des terres en même temps que les consciences', with the aid of her four hundred soldiers (p. 44). As Khalid, the leader of the Islamic armies, confronts her, he comes face to face with a woman who has taken her destiny into her own hands, who bows to no earthly or spiritual authority but her own: 'la menace d'une liberté incontrôlée est concrétisée par une femme!' (p. 43).

¹⁰Luce Irigaray, *Spéculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974). Trans. Cillian C. Gill, *Speculum of the other woman* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press 1985), p. 133.

¹¹Clarisse Zimra refers to this quotation of Djébar's made in January 1992 in 'Comment peut-on être musulmane?', in *notre librairie* 118, p. 57.

¹²Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 81-82.

¹³Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* 1 (Paris: Gallimard 1949), p. 84.

Although Sajdah's story illustrates the acceptance of women as participants, and even leaders in battle in pre-Islamic Arabia, the position of the early converts to Islam is more complex. Djébar tells the story of Oum Hakim who fights on the side of the Islamic armies in her youth and also in her later years. But in the intervening period, while she is married to Ikrima, she is forbidden by her husband to fight — the object of Ikrima's authority, she can no longer act out her destiny.

Within her new faith Oum Hakim is both free and forbidden to do battle, both fighting subject and object of male authority. Djébar makes the point that Islam did not prohibit woman's right to fight and that Oum Hakim's temporary loss of freedom is the consequence of her husband's decree, not the consequence of Islamic law. However, a direct link to the impact of Islam can be made. For despite the fact that Oum Hakim was 'technically' free to fight under the banner of Islam, her own temporary exclusion, and the general exclusion of women from war that was to follow, can be seen as the inevitable result of the new Islamic regime. For the hierarchical marriage system it instituted ensured that the decision-making process reverted to the male and that it would only be a matter of time before the new patriarchs of Islam, following in the footsteps of Ikrima, would ban 'their' women completely from war.

How does Djébar portray women's position in religious life during this transitional period? Far from being relegated to the fringes of religious life, the women of *Loin de Médine* speak out loud and clear in the name of religion. Their power is exemplified in the prophetic authority of non-Muslim women of the time, but also, most strikingly, in the images of the two women closest to the Prophet, Fatima, his beloved daughter, and Aïcha, his favourite wife: 'Parole donc de la contestation et, à l'autre extrême, parole de la transmission' (p. 337). Djébar portrays both women as guardians of the true spirit of Islam, Fatima defending it, and Aïcha transmitting it to posterity.

Fatima is 'Celle qui dit non à Médine' (p. 72). The 'non' which Fatima proclaims after her father's death is directed against those men, the new leaders of Islam, who want to deprive her of her inheritance, basing their argument on a misguided sense of spirituality, as they falsely appropriate the Prophet's words: 'Nous, les prophètes, aurait dit Mohammed un jour, on n'hérite pas de nous! Ce qui nous est donné nous est donné en don!' (p. 85).

Proclaiming her 'non' fearlessly, authoritatively and yet ultimately unsuccessfully, in a public space and in front of Abou Bekr and the Companions, Fatima becomes one of the first victims of Islamic legalism, whose material loss is but a pale reflection of a far deeper wound, that of her spiritual disenfranchisement. Angered by their dismissal of her prophetic gift, Fatima becomes a symbol of 'opposition féminine', opposed not to the faith of her beloved father, but to male distortion of the true spirit of Islam.

Aïcha too is a role-model, a symbol of female religious authority, as her stories become part of the fabric of Islam. Djébar visualises her words as resisting the heavy formulaic prose of the rawiy,¹⁴ their lyricism liberating rather than imprisoning the true

¹⁴'Rawiy' refers to a man who transmits stories about the Prophet or his Companions. 'Rawiya' (see end of paragraph) is the feminine version.

spirit of Islam: 'Ce faisant, elle trouve les mots: les mots qui n'emmailotent pas les jours d'hier, qui les dénudent. Les phrases qui ne durcissent pas en formules; qui restent poésie.' (p. 339). For Djébar, her symbolic role as mother of the children of Islam is associated with her central role in transmitting the stories of Islam:

Elle percevait faiblement le sens de ces mots 'mère des...'. Soudain une aile d'archange semble frémir au-dessus d'elle. Elle a à nourrir les autres, elle a à entretenir le souvenir, le long ruban drapé des gestes, des mots, des soupirs et des sourires du Messager — que la grâce du Seigneur lui soit accordée! Vivre le souvenir pour 'eux', les Croyants, tous les Croyants — oui, les vieux, les jeunes, les maigres, les pansus, les hésitants. Aïcha, 'mère des Croyants' parce que première des rawiyates (p. 332).

According to Leila Ahmed, it is significant that women, and Aïcha in particular, were important contributors to the oral texts of Islam. These texts were eventually transcribed into written form by men, contributing to the official history of Islam, and the literature that established the normative practices of Islamic society — the *hadith*. For Ahmed, 'the very fact of women's contribution to this important literature indicates that at least the first generation of Muslims, the generation closest to *Jahilia* days and *Jahilia* attitudes towards women — and their immediate descendants, had no difficulty accepting women as authorities'.¹⁵

Djébar, using the examples of Fatima and Aïcha also draws attention to the fact that the women of early Islam were accepted as religious authorities. For despite the fact that Fatima was ultimately disinherited by her father's successors, Djébar foregrounds her self-assurance in public and the power she wields over her audiences, demonstrating that she was a force to be reckoned with, and that she, like Aïcha, assumed a natural religious authority.

However Djébar and Ahmed differ as to their interpretation of the reasons behind the 'closures' that ensued for women, as their religious authority was gradually undermined. The example of Fatima in *Loin de Médine* foregrounds male misappropriation of the Koran as the reason behind Fatima's disinheritance, and, by implication, as the reason behind subsequent 'closures'. Ahmed, in contrast, views the losses of female autonomy not as the result of male exploitation of the true spirit of Islam but as the inevitable result of the Islamic system itself, which by its very nature undermined female authority. According to her, any autonomy women did maintain in the early days of Islam was a 'throwback' to the less patriarchal *Jahilia* days, rather than an integral part of the new religion. For, she claims, it was the new religion itself which ushered in a patriarchal age by virtue of instituting a hierarchical system of marriage.

The system of marriage which Islam established as the blueprint for sexual relationships ensured that the freedoms gained in the *Jahilia* age were slowly and inevitably eroded. Moreover, it is in the area of sexuality where it is most difficult not to relate the losses entailed for women to the new Islamic system rather than to subsequent

¹⁵Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 47.

misappropriations of the religion. The old system of 'marriage' in pre-Islamic Arabia had granted women a degree of sexual autonomy which was clamped down upon by the new family structure imposed by Islam. This structure aimed at legalising male superiority, and protecting the interests of patriarchy: 'La polygamie, la répudiation, l'interdiction de commettre *zina* [fornication, adultery] et les garanties de paternité sont autant d'institutions qui ont contribué à favoriser la transition entre l'ancienne structure, où la famille repose sur une certaine auto-détermination des femmes, et la nouvelle structure, où la famille repose sur le principe de la suprématie masculine'.¹⁶

As in Dinesen's tale, women under Islam became hostages to the concept of male honour. The cult of virginity, symbolised by Isak Dinesen's bloodstained sheets, and its corollary, the fear of *zina*, established the preservation of the honour of the male (father, husband, brother) as the new driving force behind the society of Islamic Arabia. The identity of a woman was now linked to her sexuality, which was now to be perceived as a dangerous, uncontrolled force to be contained within a strict family structure.

Various theories exist as to the conception of pre-Islamic marriages at the time of the Prophet. All, however, attest to the coexistence of a variety of types of marriages, including both matrilinear and patrilinear. Robertson Smith describes two of these as the 'sadica' (friend, or marriage of friendship), and 'ba'al' (property, or marriage of property) marriages.¹⁷ In the 'sadica' marriage, where the children and wife belonged to the wife's tribe, the wife could banish her husband at will. Physical paternity was not significant and the woman's chastity did not have a social function. In the patrilinear 'ba'al' marriage, however, where the child belonged to the father's tribe, and where proof of physical paternity was paramount, her chastity was required in establishing physical paternity.

A more complex but complementary account of marriage or pre-Islamic sexual unions emerges from the records of Al Buchtari, as transmitted by Aïcha, who cited four types of marriage prevalent in the pre-Islamic age. Two of these were polyandrous, the wife having as many husbands as she wanted. Although there is this evidence of polygyny before Islam, the type which the Prophet practised, virilocal polygyny, was rare.¹⁸ According to Mernissi, polygyny in the pre-Islamic matrilinear context probably entailed a husband visiting his different wives where they resided with their tribes, just as wives might have been visited by different husbands. In three out of four of 'Aïcha's marriages', there is no emphasis on physical paternity, and therefore the notion of female chastity was absent.¹⁹

By transferring the rights to women's sexuality and her offspring from the woman and her tribe to man, and then by basing the new definition of marriage on that 'proprietary male right' Islam changed the balance of power between the sexes: 'Implicit

¹⁶Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, Idéologie, Islam* (Paris: Tièrce, 1983), p. 59.

¹⁷W. Robertson Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1903), p. 94.

¹⁸Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, p. 44.

¹⁹Fatima Mernissi, *Sexe, Idéologie, Islam*, p. 76.

in this new order was the male right to control women and to interdict their interactions with other men'.²⁰ According to Ahmed, the ground was now prepared for the closures that would follow: 'women's exclusion from social activities in which they might have contact with men other than those with rights to their sexuality; their physical seclusion, soon to become the norm: and the institution of other mechanisms of control, such as instilling the notion of submission as a woman's duty'.²¹

Within *Loin de Médine*'s multivalent framework, Djebbar celebrates the sexual autonomy of pre-Islamic women, but also attempts to show that women in early Islamic marriages also had a certain autonomy. In the areas where autonomy was maintained (women for example had the right to initiate and refuse proposals of marriage), this message is reinforced in *Loin de Médine*. Where, in contrast, her autonomy is stripped, rather than challenging the position of male supremacy, *Loin de Médine* glosses over these 'closures', obscuring the consequences they entailed for women.

Rather than condemn Islam's endorsement of male only polygyny, Djebbar focuses on the fulfilment and intimacy of couples living within such polygamous relationships: 'l'expérience de l'amour conjugal — vécu sans doute en passion unique au cœur de la polygamie' (p. 238). Djebbar foregrounds the capacity for 'une passion unique' within polygamous unions. Thus Esma, twice widowed, three times married to polygamous husbands, is 'Esma, l'amoureuse. Esma à la vie pleine qui goûta trois vies de femme et qui, dans chacune, fut vraiment femme'. (p. 267). The positive emphasis on the physical intimacy of the couple within a polygamous union is achieved at the expense of any feminist critique of a practice which gave the husband, but not the wife, the right to several sexual unions.

Similarly, the male prerogative on divorce is glossed over in the story of Oum Keltoum's second marriage to Zubeir, Ibn el Awwam. Here again the spiritual dimension of the story obscures the underlying problem of a system of divorce which privileges the husband at the expense of his wife. Oum Keltoum rebels against her new husband who ignores her repeated pleas for a divorce: 'Je désire que tu me répudies! finit-elle par dire à l'heure de la prière, un après-midi, à Zubeir entré chez elle. Il la regarda. Ne lui répondit rien.' (p. 194). Her release from marriage finally comes thanks to a moment of divine intervention, when she surprises him at the hour of prayer: 'Zubeir qui va s'adresser à Dieu, qui allège son esprit de ses soucis, de ses colères, de son désir hostile, Zubeir, surpris, s'est tourné vers elle; elle, la rétive. Encore habité de l'idée de Dieu, vers lequel humblement il désire s'approcher, il répond cette fois d'emblée, sans réfléchir: — Femme, par Dieu, tu es répudiée!' (p. 195).

By foregrounding this instance of divine reprieve and female freedom, *Loin de Médine* distances itself from direct criticism of Islam's reductive divorce laws. The Islamic God if not the Islamic laws is on the side of woman. In her desire to portray Islamic women as autonomous creatures, Djebbar represses the reality of Islam's patriarchal marriage system.

²⁰Leila Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam*, p. 62.

²¹Ibid., p. 62.

The Prophet-as-subject?

How does this desire to represent Islamic women as *subjects* relate to Djébar's portrayal of the Prophet as the author of Islam? Can Djébar's women be free if they are the objects of Prophetic authority? Her treatment of the Prophet reveals an underlying tension within the work. Roland Barthes, describing the practice, in narration, of privileging one subject over another, states that the subject can also be double: 'This dual is all the more interesting in that it relates to the subject of certain (very modern) games, in which two equal opponents try to gain possession of an object put into circulation by a referee'.²² The dual of duel being fought out in *Loin de Médine* is between the two competing subjects: *woman-as-subject* and the *Prophet-as-subject*. Is the subject of the novel the women who speak out from within the golden frame of Dinesen's tale, or is it the Prophet whose emblem, like that of the golden crown, adorns its golden plate, casting its objectifying shadow over the women contained within the frame?

Although the framework of *Loin de Médine* is polyvalent, encompassing the women of both pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabia, the emblem of Islam, in the shape of the person of the Prophet, is inscribed throughout the work, as the Prophet's voice both literally and metaphorically speaks throughout its pages. How can the woman-as-subject, voice set free, the voice of freedom, coexist with the Prophet-as-subject, the Voice of authority?

In contrast to the portrayal of women-as-subject in both the private and public domains, with the emphasis on the latter, the picture given of Mohammed is one which is very much concentrated on the private, the personal, and the spiritual. By elevating the voice of the prophet to a mystical force, by foregrounding the spiritual, it is as if the allegations of patriarchy based on the pragmatic practices of Islam are literally 'spirited away', leaving behind a Voice which speaks with, for, and alongside woman.

Ahmed explains the seemingly 'inexplicable' contention made by many Muslim women, that Islam is not sexist, as a consequence of what she describes as the two distinct voices within Islam, and the two competing understandings of gender within it — one expressed in the pragmatic regulations for society (based on a patriarchal notion of gender), and the other in the articulation of an ethical vision (proclaiming an egalitarian conception of gender).²³

Ahmed notes that these tensions are contained within the Koran itself, which despite appearing to consolidate marriage as a hierarchical institution contains verses which appear to qualify this position.²⁴ Ahmed goes so far as to say that: 'Islam's ethical vision, which is stubbornly egalitarian with respect to the sexes, is thus in tension with, and

²²Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, Stephen Heath (ed.), (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 108.

²³Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, pp. 64/65.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 63. Ahmed points out specific Koranic verses which qualify marriage as a hierarchical institution (ie. giving women equal rights — directing men who wish to be polygamous to treat all their wives equally, but implying that this is an impossible ideal — sanctioning Islamic divorce, but going on to condemn divorce as being abhorrent to God etc.).

might even be seen to subvert, the hierarchical structure of marriage pragmatically instituted in the first Islamic society'.²⁵

So it is the ethical, egalitarian voice of Islam which speaks through Djébar's Prophet, a voice which rises above and drowns out the accusations of patriarchy directed at the pragmatic practices of Islam. In Djébar's representation of the prophet she foregrounds the private man, the Prophet at home with his family. He emerges as the idealised father-figure, both in relation to his beloved daughter Fatima, and in relation to the other daughters of Islam, to whom this relationship is symbolically extended. It is his voice, the Voice of the Father, rather than the voice of the Mother which corresponds to Cixous' primeval song: 'The voice in each woman, moreover is not only her own, but springs from the deepest layers of her psyche: her own speech becomes the echo of the primeval song she once heard, the voice the incarnation of the 'first voice of love which all women preserve alive... in each woman sings the first nameless love'... the Voice of the Mother...' ²⁶

Loin de Médine's primeval song is the song of the Prophet, a song which resonates deep into the heart of its hearers, women such as Oum Hakim, whose story illustrates the mystical power of His voice. On the day of 'le sermon de l'Adieu', Mohammed's last public appearance, Oum Hakim is drawn towards the thronging crowd, and then to the Voice. The Voice which transforms her life is compelling, drawing her to itself in an almost mystical way: 'Elle sortit dans le matin ensoleillé. Elle se découvrait une hâte irraisonnée: dépasser ces rangées d'auditeurs, se rapprocher de quoi, sinon la voix qui se gonflait maintenant, qui prenait de l'ampleur, qui s'éloignait puis revenait. Oum Hakim, comme dans un rêve, se dirigeait avec la même hâte vers l'avant.' (p. 161). Despite herself, she is completely taken over by his presence: 'Se rapprochant du lieu où il se tenait, Oum Hakim se sentait en état de ne plus rien entendre, de ne plus rien comprendre. Figée, tendue tout entière à regarder, à ... (plus tard elle songea sans oser le dire: 'à témoigner')'. (p. 162). And, as the Voice takes on a powerful intensity, she is carried onto a higher plane: 'Oum Hakim percevait, comme voguant à travers d'autres sphères, la voix aérienne de Mohammed' (p. 163).

The representation of the Prophet foregrounds not only the impact of his spiritual power, but also the emotion of tenderness which he bestows liberally on his daughter Fatima and on all the daughters of Islam. In *Loin de Médine* the Prophet's communications with women are characterised not only by tenderness but also by light-heartedness:

Puis il rit, il rit ouvertement. Moi, bouleversée, j'ai répondu des larmes dans la voix.
(p. 42). [conversation with Aïcha]

Et la douceur de ses paroles illumina la face de la nouvelle adoptée. (p. 101).
[conversation with Habiba]

²⁵Ibid., p. 65.

²⁶Toril Moi, *Sexual-textual politics: feminist literary theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 114.

The Prophet's relationship to woman is, however, at its most striking in his spiritual 'bonding' with Fatima. Djébar evokes their intense relationship, recreating a scene shortly before the Prophet's death, where Fatima finds him lost in a trance. The extremes of emotions portrayed reinforce the mystical intensity of the scene:

Elle pleure, ployée en silence; elle se déchire, sans nulle réponse du père. Elle mêle seulement ses larmes contagieuses à celles du malade... Alors Fatima brusquement consolée s'illumine; son visage encore en larmes s'éclaire d'une joie enfantine; elle sourit; elle rit. A nouveau penchée sur le père gisant, elle lui fait partager sa joie; et celui-ci de s'éclairer de cette volubilité filiale... Père et fille dans les larmes, puis dans l'égouttement pour ainsi dire du bonheur survenant, fusant enfin de toutes parts. (p. 65)

In this portrayal of Mohammed, Djébar is in fact privileging what is perceived in traditional terms as the 'feminine side' of the Prophet's character, the adjectives 'doux', 'tendre', his ready capacity for emotions, his propensity for tears breaking down the hierarchical male/female opposition between them. But here it is not man but The Man, 'Mohammed avec son auréole de dernier prophète mais aussi sa présence toute humaine', the Prophet, who in his bonding/fusing with Fatima — 'Père et fille... fusant de toutes parts' — breaks down the divide, crosses out the bar, transcends the relationship of otherness, for a woman, if not all women 'est une partie de lui-même' — Fatima, not part of the eternal mother figure, forever linked in semiotic harmony, but Fatima the beloved daughter, eternally linked to the ideal father in a relationship of spiritual equality, defying the otherness which patriarchal Islam has since been trying to impose in its male specularisation of the other (p. 72).

The dual/duel between the competing subjects of Médine, woman-as-subject and the Prophet-as-subject, is to some extent resolved by Djébar's obscuring the 'difference' between the Prophet-as-man and Fatima-as-woman, by refusing to oppose them in a power relationship of man/woman, allowing them to relate as equal subjects bound by a mystical spiritual relationality.

Djébar presents a new non-hierarchical Islam, not only by foregrounding the Prophet's relationship with Fatima, but also by the implication that the very authorship of Islam is shared by women, women who are the *mothers of Islam* — or 'les femmes qui firent l'Islam'.²⁷ The decision to present the personal side of the Prophet, the Messenger 'at home', rather than 'at work' serves to emphasise the influential role women had in his life, and by implication, in the formation of both the message and the future of Islam.²⁸ In *Loin de Médine* women are seen to share the authorship of Islam, and, as such, retain a measure of their subjecthood. Their faith is not an exclusively male faith, with a single, all-powerful male Author, but a faith in which women shared in its beginnings, its creation, and in which the 'mères des Croyants' gave birth to its future.

²⁷Clarisse Zimra, 'Comment peut-on être musulmane?', in *notre librairie* 118, p. 60.

²⁸Although sources vary, the best substantiated evidence suggests that Muhammad had 11 wives and two concubines.

The concept of the shared authorship of Islam is further reinforced in *Loin de Médine* by stories showing how the Koran was inspired by the lives of individual women — women such as Oum Keltoum, ‘la fugueuse’, who at the age of fifteen left her family at Mecca to join the Prophet and his followers at Médine. Her brothers’ attempts to recapture her prompted the *sura* protecting the lives of converted women who have to flee their families: ‘Des décennies durant, il suffira qu’une fugueuse répétât ces deux phrases du Prophète — rapportées par son épouse Aïcha — pour que, jeune ou vieille, forte ou faible, elle soit sauvegardée, mise sous la protection islamique et, en aucun cas, renvoyée à un père, à des frères, à un mari ...’ (p. 187).

Also lending weight to this concept of shared authorship is the image of an Islamic ‘family tree’ of which women such as Oum Fadl, sister of Maïmouna, ‘mère des Croyants’, are the roots:

Oum Fadl dont le premier fils, Fadl, s’est occupé de l’ensevelissement du Prophète avec Ali et Abbas, dont le second, Abdallah, deviendra plus tard un des plus célèbres commentateurs du Coran, Oum Fadl se sent peu à peu comme une première mémoire pour les Musulmanes. Au centre de la famille du Prophète — lui qui n’a pas eu de fils et dont presque toutes les filles sont mortes — Oum Fadl porte en elle tout un passé récent, brûlant comme une braise!’ (pp. 57-58).

Femmes-mères, femmes-épouses, filles-héritières

Despite the tributes to women, and to the ‘mères des Croyants’, the role of motherhood in the relational rather than the genealogical sense is deliberately bypassed in *Loin de Médine*, as Djébar displaces the feminists’ privileged mother-child relationship with the father-daughter bond. The mother-child relationship is absent, not only in the portrayal of the Prophet’s family, but also in the portrayal of ‘les femmes insoumises’. Their identity is as women, not as mothers; it is established in being actors, not as ‘mere subjects of male action and female biology’.²⁹ Those who have converted to Islam, ‘les soumises’, are, similarly, not represented within mother-daughter relationships but within husband-wife, and father-daughter configurations.

Esma ‘la laveuse des morts’, who will wash and embalm the body of Fatima, and in later years that of Abou Bekr, figures as part of a symbolic chain of relationships in which the role of motherhood is deliberately excluded, a chain which includes the Prophet himself, Fatima (the Prophet’s daughter and Esma’s friend), Abou Bekr (Aïcha’s father, the Prophet’s friend and the first caliph of Islam), Aïcha (the Prophet’s wife, and Abou Bekr’s daughter), and Esma (Abou Bekr’s daughter and sister of Aïcha).

Djébar builds up a web of relationships, weaving in and out of the five figures tightening ‘le fil invisible’ around one and then the other, highlighting the bonds of intimacy between them, then loosening the thread, allowing the bond to be examined

²⁹Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, ‘The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding’, in *Signs* (1980), 5, 3, pp. 389-417, see p. 409.

more closely. The invisible thread winds round and round the five figures in a configuration bringing together man with man by the intermediary of women — Esma, Fatima and Aïcha linking the prophet and his caliph in multiple bonds of marriage, friendship and kinship: 'Ainsi la mort pour le 'Nabi' [Prophet] et pour son vicaire deviendra vraiment fraternelle, rapprochant les deux hommes, si proches de leur vivant, par double, par triple intercession féminine' (p. 237). It is as if the different threads of Islam are brought together by women, women who relate to men not as mothers, but as daughters and wives. The thread which links these men and women is now transposed into another, more mystical plane, acquiring an almost dream-like quality, as the group of four is highlighted against the radiant Father-figure:

Une sorte de jeu éclatant et abstrait, un mouvement intérieur translucide se lie et se délie autour de ce groupe de figures: Mohammed avec son auréole de dernier des Prophètes mais aussi sa présence toute humaine, Abou Bekr en face, et de l'autre côté Aïcha, jeune femme de dix-huit ans liée aux deux hommes, puis Fatima silhouette à la fois mélancolique et indomptable, sous l'éclat presque unique du Père, enfin, en arrière de celle-ci, dans son ombre, Esma les mains tendues vers Fatima, les yeux encore levés vers Abou Bekr qui va disparaître. (p. 237)

In this 'tableau' or picture of 'les hommes et les femmes qui firent l'Islam', now so closely linked and interwoven as to defy their 'différence', and their differences, the light of Islam, 'l'éclat du Père' is shining brightly onto the frame, radiating directly onto Fatima's face, light which is then diffused onto the surrounding figures. Esma is the symbol of a healing link, bringing together in death Fatima and Abou Bekr, whose bitter alienation in life would be the catalyst for the bitter fracturation of Islam.

Djebar then shines her torch on the absent Mother-figure, which she associates not with Islam, but with the cult of Mary which 'shaped by pagan obsessions with fertility and chastity, has already made a fetish of virginity and motherhood':³⁰

Pour ces deux hommes dont le destin s'accomplit dans son ampleur à quarante ans et au-delà, la mère, toutefois est absente. Ce rôle, de nos jours surévalué dans le vécu masculin musulman, était quasiment évacué. Islam, en son commencement se contente d'adopter les valeurs de la maternité envers Marie, mère de Jésus... Le thème de la maternité a été tellement glorifié, célébré à satiété durant les sept siècles chrétiens qui ont précédé, qu'il semble normal de le voir alors reculer. (p. 238)

In her criticism of the traditional perception of motherhood Djebar's view conforms to that of feminists who view motherhood as the basis for women's oppression: 'she [Kristeva] has claimed that it is not *woman* as such who is repressed by patriarchal society but *motherhood*'.³¹ But rather than viewing Islam as part of the problem of

³⁰'Mary, Mary, once contrary', *The Independent on Sunday*, (24 August 1997), p. 18.

³¹Toril Moi, *Sexual-textual politics*, p. 167.

patriarchy 'the prevailing religion of the entire planet',³² Djébar suggests that Islam provides a powerful new role model for woman. She displaces the powerless Christian *femme-mère* onto the powerful Islamic *filles-héritières*. As the powerless 'femme-mère' recedes into the background, the powerful female figures of Islam rise up: 'Les femmes-épouses, les filles héritières se lèvent, elles, en cette aurore de l'Islam, dans une modernité neuve.' (p. 238). Thus, claims Djébar, women of Islam were not originally defined as 'femmes-mères', in relationships of subservience to man and child, but as 'femmes-épouses' in relationships of equality and love, or as 'filles-héritières' in relationships of power, producing a sexual and economic revolution the world was not yet ready for 'l'insupportable révolution féministe de l'Islam en ce VII^e siècle chrétien!' (p. 86).

Ideological collision?

Can Djébar thus really reclaim Islam for women or is this a contradictory position to uphold? The ambiguity of her position is revealed in the structure of her language. In the 'tableau' of the five figures, Fatima's silhouette is visualised 'sous l'éclat *presque unique* du Père' (my italics). Is it that the figure of Fatima is lit up *almost completely* by the Father's radiant being, or is it the radiance itself, 'l'éclat' which is not unique, but almost unique, the Truth or almost all the truth, the 'almost' letting in the suggestion of otherness, of other realities, self-determined, subjective realities, self-determining, subject-women, grating against the uniqueness, the exclusiveness of objective, authoritative Islam.

For although Djébar overtly challenges a 'closed' view of Islam, her acceptance of the Prophet as a figure of authority shows an adherence to a certain objective truth, conflicting with her celebration of plurality, of otherness, of women who have their own different versions of the truth, implying an understanding of truth as subjective. This conflict symbolises the meeting and clash of mutually exclusive ideologies, Islam and feminism, both of which have 'interpellated' the author, neither of which she can wholly accept or reject.³³ However some kind of resolution can be found in the form of a 'politically correct Islam', its ideological fusion, (not its content) modelled along the lines of Christian feminism:

What does it mean to these women to be called 'Christian' feminists? Certainly it does not suggest anything distinctive or unique about Jesus Christ. Being Christian involves being religiously open; open to all other cultural and religious traditions where freedom

³²Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1978), p. 39.

³³See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971), and in particular the chapter entitled 'Ideology Interpellates Individuals as Subjects', pp. 50-57, where Althusser suggests that ideologies 'interpellate' or recruit individuals, transforming them into subjects.

for women is being sought, and open above all to the possibility that Christianity might be wrong. It means being prepared to allow experience to sift through the traditions in which we have previously seen ourselves and to work out a new hermeneutic which will make sense of this. In some cases it means being prepared to embrace a new paganism which will begin to incorporate the old female earth religions with a new non-patriarchal Christianity.³⁴

Djebar too allows her feminist consciousness to sift through Islam in order 'to work out a new 'hermeneutic' which will make sense of this'.³⁵ *Loin de Médine* too is open to all other cultural and religious traditions, not embracing a new paganism, but incorporating the old paganism of pre-Islamic Arabia with a new non-hierarchical Islam. For it is not only the special presence of the Prophet but also that of the non-Muslim heroines, 'les insoumises' which radiates out from the pages of *Loin de Médine*, revealing his 'éclat' as *not completely unique*, but rather as *shared* with these 'others' who challenge his pre-eminence and his monopoly on the Truth.

Djebar's openness to these 'other' heroines is such that she celebrates their intelligence, courage and wit, even when these qualities are pitted against the might and mores of Islam, even when their 'éclat' rivals that of the Prophet. The Prophet shares his 'éclat' with 'la chanteuse des satires', the renowned poetess. This powerful woman uses her word as a subversive weapon against her enemies, foremost of which is Mohammed himself:

Avant le départ des chefs des Beni Kinda à Médine et donc avant leur islamisation, la poétesse avait été l'auteur de nombreuses diatribes poétiques contre Mohammed en personne... C'est cet *éclat* même, c'est cette gloire acquise tôt dans la guerre verbale, qui dut ensuite retenir la chanteuse. Elle ne vint pas, c'est certain, à Médine; elle ne se trouva pas en présence de celui qui avait fait l'objet de sa verve acérée. Par fidélité à son art — une forme d'amour propre — elle dut croire que ce serait se renier que devenir musulmane. (p. 132) [my italics]

Despite the fact that the poetess's distrust of religion is linked to its potential for stifling self-expression, this indirect indictment of Islam is counteracted by the suggestion that her fear is unfounded, and by the statement that art itself is nothing more than an expression of pride. Djebar thus celebrates the poetess's energy and art as a powerful life-force and yet denounces her spark of poetic genius as a dangerous expression of rebellion 'sa poésie-danger' and as a form of blind arrogance: 'Tant que sa flamme la nourrissait, tant que son rôle polémique la paraît aux yeux des siens d'une valeur rare, plus rare que la beauté, plus recherchée que l'attrait féminin ordinaire, elle n'éprouvait nul besoin de croire en Dieu. Quel Dieu? N'avait-elle pas en elle une étincelle divine?' (p. 132).

³⁴Elaine Storkey, *Contributions to Christian Feminism* (London: Christian Impact, 1995), p. 13.

³⁵*Ibid.*

There is admiration for this 'High Priestess of Poetry', but also a suggestion that her poetry is blasphemous and her religion false, its promise of immortality an illusion. The treatment the poetess receives at the hands of the Islamic military leader, Mohadjir ibn Ommayya, is horrific — her teeth are pulled out, her hands cut off. Her body but not her soul is cruelly crushed into submission: 'Je les maudirai avec mes mains, mes mains coupées!... Mon chant leur restera insaisissable, tel l'épervier qu'ils n'atteignent pas!' (p. 136). Yet Djébar stresses that this barbaric act was condemned by the official representative of Islam, Abou Bekr and, as such, can be seen as a betrayal of the true spirit of Islam. So both the role of Islam as the perpetrator of evil, and the role of the poetess as the heroine are qualified. Islam is not the true villain, neither is the poetess the perfect heroine.

'Kérama la Chrétienne' also has a radiating presence : 'On me disait belle dans ma jeunesse, certains le répètent encore comme s'ils avaient vu mon visage d'alors, alors qu'ils voyaient, j'en suis sûre, *l'éclat*, sur ma face, de mon espérance d'hier, de mon espérance d'aujourd'hui' (p. 141) (my italics). She is an octogenarian nun whose legendary beauty convinces a simple Bedouin, attached to General Khalid's army, that she should be taken as a slave. Kérama's people rise to her defence, but because their position is precarious, and the whole situation so ridiculous, she offers to confront the old Bedouin herself rather than risk her people engaging in a doomed battle.

Again the official Islamic representative present in the story, General Khalid, is seen to distance himself from, and to be embarrassed by the whole episode 'tout en lui semblait regretter cette intervention' (p. 144). He shows respect to her and to her people: 'Retourne chez les tiens! Mon respect, notre respect pour toi et pour tous ceux du Livre t'accompagne. Que Dieu te garde!' (p. 146).

As Khalid and Abou Bekr act as representatives of the true spirit of Islam, a spirit which is open to the other, and which condemns the abuse of power, their messages parallel the ideological agendas of the work. *Loin de Médine* presents an Islam which is open to the outside, to the other, echoing the theology of Christian feminists. It also contrasts the misappropriations of power perpetrated in the name of a hierarchical Islam with the true, non-hierarchical spirit of Islam represented by the Prophet, and those closest to him.

This second agenda is more in line with the thinking of evangelical feminist theology which seeks not to open up Christianity to the outside, but to expose an open or egalitarian spirit on the inside. Ironically it is the figure of Mary that is invoked to support this assertion. So Mary, 'la femme-mère', considered not only by Djébar but also by many *liberal* Christian feminists as unworthy of standing as a figure of women's liberation, is cited by *evangelical* Christian feminists as revealing an egalitarian spirit at the heart of Christianity.³⁶ Their interpretation of the importance of her role for women does not rely on her virginity representing a symbol of autonomy, but on her occupying a

³⁶Ibid., p. 47. Storkey points out that although Mary's virginity has been interpreted as a symbol of female autonomy, feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza believe that ecclesiastical ideology has so distorted her image, in focusing exclusively on her virginity and her role as ideal mother, that she cannot be a symbol of women's liberation.

focal point in biblical history: 'It is a woman, rather than a man whom God chooses as the human vehicle which travels between the old and new covenants'.³⁷

The concept of an apologia for the lost spirit of Islam is reinforced in *Loin de Médine* by an incident related about Omar ibn el Khattab, the second caliph, who recounts one of his last conversations with the Prophet, where they lament the passing of the golden age of Islam. The Prophet, finding Omar in tears, asks him why he is distressed:

Ce qui me fait pleurer, c'est que, jusqu'à présent, nous étions dans un accroissement constant dans notre religion, mais si, à présent, elle est achevée, il faut dire qu'il n'y a pas de choses qui atteignent la plénitude sans que, par la suite, elles ne s'amoindrissent! Et le Prophète, m'ayant écouté, a répondu après un long moment: 'Certes, Omar, tu dis vrai!' (p. 167)

The true spirit of Islam is rehabilitated not only as liberal, in the sense of being open, but also as liberating. 'Islam, le contraire de la contrainte' are the words voiced by Oum Keltoum, whose revulsion against her second husband provokes her determination to be released from her marriage: '—Je suis musulmane! Si je désire encore partir, c'est parce que je n'accepte pas Zubeir comme époux! L'Islam c'est le contraire de la contrainte! se reconforta-t-elle peu à peu.' (p. 193). The hierarchy within their marriage is symbolically reversed, not by Islamic law which upholds this hierarchy, but by the Prophet, the author of Islam, who when confronted by Zubeir's complaints about Oum Keltoum, upholds *the woman's* position in the spirit of egalitarian Islam and admonishes *the man* (alluding to a *sura* inspired by Oum Keltoum): '—Tu ne peux pas parler ainsi de cette femme, ô Zubeir. N'oublie pas que, pour cette Croyante, Dieu lui-même est intervenu!'... Tête baissée, le cœur humilié, il salua et quitta la pièce' (p. 197).

The impulse towards freedom leads Djébar not only to find it both outside and inside Islam, but also to extend it to the concept of faith itself, validating 'une foi interrogatoire'. The freedom to question makes it possible for all the daughters of Islam, as it does for Oum Hakim, to come full circle and to freely choose the way of Islam. Like Djébar, Oum Hakim is simultaneously placed both at the heart, and on the boundaries of faith. By selecting a woman of impeccable Islamic credentials as the subject of doubt (Oum Hakim's second marriage is to Omar ibn el Khattab, the second caliph), Djébar is presenting it as an acceptable facet of faith, rather than as a betrayal of the truth.

Oum Hakim se savait musulmane d'emprunt, en quelque sorte. Non pas honteuse, non pas hypocrite, simplement 'musulmane' ('soumise' comme ils spécifiaient parfois) parce que ainsi elle avait gardé, envers et contre tous, son époux... Elle ne priait pas. (p. 160)

Djébar highlights ways in which Oum Hakim is a reluctant convert to Islam (she converts in order to save her husband, retains an attachment to the pagan statues of her childhood and refuses to pray), but also shows how this 'hésitation intérieure' is overcome, as Oum Hakim, inspired by her vision of the Prophet, goes on to distinguish

³⁷Ibid., p. 55. For further discussion of 'Mary from a Feminist perspective', see pp. 43-57.

herself on the Islamic battlefield and to gain religious prominence through her marriage (p. 170).

Historical methodology

On an ideological level, Djébar allows feminist thinking to open her religion to the outside. At the same time she refuses to allow it to shine a torch on the problematic areas on the inside. Does this ambiguity towards feminist thinking also inscribe the work on the level of historical methodology? Reverting to Dinesen's tale, Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn see in the 'Blank Page' a demonstration of the concerns of feminist historians:

The nuns are entrusted with keeping the records, with preserving the histories of royal women as recorded on their marriage sheets and then framed and displayed for future generations. In this respect they function like traditional historians whose focus has been the history of dynasties and who, if they have attended women at all, consider them within a domestic sphere and in relation to the ruling families.³⁸

Green and Kahn also point out that the nuns' records also tell a different story. For although the frames they display suggest the traditional way women have been contained in history, the blank page suggests a subtext which is subversive to the main text: 'These two taken together represent the traditional paradigm and alternatives to it'.³⁹ Does Djébar's narrative frame also simultaneously repeat and yet challenge the traditional paradigm? To what extent does Djébar take up the feminist challenge and resist:

- The traditional periodisation of history based on the concept of male achievement,
- The traditional concentration on the 'history of dynasties',
- The traditional opposition between exclusively male and exclusively female history?

Superficially, *Médine*'s structure appears to mimic the periodisation of history based on the concept of male achievement. The prologue is centred around the Prophet in his dying moments at a time when the whole of Arabia was unified under the religion of Islam and its messenger. The book is then divided into two chronologically successive parts relating to the Caliphates of the Prophet's two successors, Abou Bekr (10^e-13^e année de l'hégire), and Omar ibn el Khattab (13^e-23^e année de l'hégire).

The contents of the prologue, however, and the internal sections within the two main parts, undermine the 'male' framework. The Prophet's dying moments show him not only as a figure of authority, as the divine messenger, but as a vulnerable figure in all his humanity. The opening scene also underlines one of the central tenets of *Loin de Médine*, which is that the Prophet was surrounded by, loved by, and dependent on women. Similarly, although the work is divided into two parts, based on two successive Caliphates, all the chapters they contain bear the title of a female subject who questions male authority. The main challenge to traditional periodisation, is not, however, related

³⁸Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn, *Making a Difference*, p. 12.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 12.

to a concept of history based on *male* achievement, but to a concept of history limited to that of *Islamic* achievement. The swift movement between pre-Islamic and Islamic heroines, a movement which implies a common voice, a cry of sisterhood, defies the Islamic historian's tendency to cut off the pre-Islamic age, and to view the birth of Islam as the starting point of history.

Despite this challenge to periodisation, Djébar, like Dinesen's nuns, appears to repeat the traditional paradigm, as she acts as the guardian not of the history of a royal dynasty but of the history of a religious dynasty, the Prophet's family. Although *Loin de Médine* provides an insight into the lives of both ordinary and extraordinary women, the text does, however, privilege the 'greats', the extraordinary women of the past, whether 'soumises' or 'insoumises'. The work does include a plethora of ordinary people, but their inclusion is subordinated to an ideological agenda which seeks to present Islam as an open religion.⁴⁰ Djébar does, however, use her extraordinary heroines to show how women of this transitional age functioned outside the 'domestic sphere', and as such challenges the traditional conception of women, and especially Muslim women, as being excluded from the public world.

Not only do feminist historians reject the privileging of the 'greats' of history, but they also denounce the privileging of female history over male history. As with feminist literature, feminist historical scholarship has come to reject the substitution of women's history (as opposed to women's literature) for mainstream history (as opposed to the canon) as reduplicating the central assumption — woman as the 'other', separate and apart. As with early feminist literary criticism which sought to *compensate* for the repression of female writers by creating a female canon, early feminist historians also concerned themselves with *compensatory history* charting the lives of exceptional women and paying particular attention to women's contributions.

The trends of feminist literary criticism and feminist historical scholarship can be seen to mimic developments in feminist politics, which, according to Kristeva, progressed from this compensatory phase (as women demanded equal rights and strove to be accepted into the symbolic order) through a radical exclusive phase towards a more inclusive relationship to the world of men.⁴¹ Although the compensatory stage has been criticised for appending women to the symbolic order (or to history or to literature) as it has already been defined (while leaving the existing paradigm unchallenged), it can nevertheless be viewed as the valuable and necessary precursor to the more inclusive philosophy which succeeded it.

The compensatory stage to which *Loin de Médine* could be appended must be viewed in the same way as that of the early western feminist movement, as a necessary first step

⁴⁰Examples of 'ordinary people' include Habiba, the errant woman who demonstrates Islam's acceptance of 'difference' of people who are normally marginalised by society, and Djamila who demonstrates Islam's encouragement of the Arts (Habiba is the only entirely fictional main character in the work, see N.B. at the end of 'principaux personnages cités', p. 350).

⁴¹Julia Kristeva's analysis of the three stages in the development of the women's movement is elaborated in 'Women's time', translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake in *Signs* (1981), 7, 1, pp. 13-35, see pp. 33-34.

in the struggle towards equality. Against the background of the Algeria of today, compared to that of the 1960s when the Anglo-American feminists were coming up with their compensatory histories, it is no mean feat for Djébar to ask 'them', *les intégristes*, through the pages of *Loin de Médine*, however indirectly, not to be let into the symbolic order, the Nom-du-Père, but into the religion of the idealised Father, the order of Islam.

Having established that *Loin de Médine* does privilege female history over male history, and the history of 'Great women' at that, how does the Prophet fit into the picture? He takes his place as the exception that proves the rule. For he is included not as one of many men, but as 'The Man', celebrated not for his representativeness but for his exceptional presence.

In *Loin de Médine* Djébar's Prophet and Djébar's women come together, fusing the dual forces of Islam and feminism to create a 'politically correct' religion which foregrounds Islam's egalitarian tendencies while repressing its inherent patriarchal structure. Nevertheless it succeeds in giving birth to a polyphony of female voices which sometimes jar against, but more often than not merge harmoniously with, the Voice of the Prophet.